

*'Being Holy Starts with what We Don't Say'* based on Matthew 15:1-20, James 3:5b-6  
Delivered on Sunday, August 16, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

There is a lot going on in this text from the Gospel of Matthew today. In these mere 20 verses, brings up a lot about how even the most pious and faithful, can get caught up and confused about what can be considered holy, and what can be considered worldly, or common, or defiled. Do you generally feel you are a good person? I think we all want to feel that way. The Pharisees and scribes who challenged Jesus, they felt that way too.

When the Pharisees challenge Jesus, it isn't because they are more evil than you or me. They are challenging Jesus because they believe that they are defending their faith. They believe they are defending their ancestors and their history, and these ancestors and their history reflect their faith passed down, a faith in the one true God, creator of all things, the Lord. They defend these traditions by any means necessary, because these traditions are what set them apart, what make them exceptional to the world. These traditions, they believe, are what make them holy.

The word holy is one of those church words we use all the time, but as I've done from time to time with this word, I want to define it for you again. The word holy, or *'kadosh'* in Hebrew, and *'hagia'* in Greek, means to be set apart, to be different from the world with God as our Lord, in charge of our life. God is holy – God is set apart from the ways of this world. The opposite of holy is to be common, ordinary or worldly. It is to act as if God was not the Lord of your life, which, in ancient cultures, meant to be unclean, requiring you to be restored to God. (*NOTE: The handwashing in this text is not sanitary handwashing as recommended for health, but a ritual cleaning of restoration.*)

If you have your bible at home, and I hope you do have a physical bible in your home, then you may have noticed that my translation that I did for today is a little different. You see, back when they started translating the bible into English 500 years ago, the words we used in the English language had different meanings. For instance, did you know mansion, used to mean just a room? But since Jesus promised many mansions in God's house, our human imaginations changed the word's meaning, and now we think of giant elaborate homes, when Jesus's promise in John's gospel was a place to stay, until the new creation is complete.

Now, most newer translations have changed mansions back to rooms or dwelling places, but in the passage today, a word that's evolved a lot in meaning, remains in most bibles. The word defile to us today means to be filthy or rotten, even ruined forever. But the Greek word we translate as defile means – common or ordinary. Now, when the word 'defile' was first used to translate the Greek word *'koinoi,'* which is similar to the word we translate as fellowship or common life. But *koinoi* meant to make something unclean, or unholy, or common. Tying it to the word holy, as it should be linked. So, my translation attempts to restore that, by using the term worldly, since this is the kind of common, that Jesus and all of scripture, warn us against.

I think this is important because as Christians, it's easy to think we are far from being "defiled," but we miss the places in our life where we allow what is worldly to affect us, to shade how we perceive our holiness and what matters to God in our faith. What Jesus does in these 20 verses is show us how the faithful can do this, and how our concern shouldn't be with outward displays of

faith, but with our hearts, and nothing reveals the heart like our words, including those we post on social media and the Internet.

When the Pharisees say that Jesus is violating the traditions of their elders, they are concerned, because in the changing world around them, it is getting harder to practice their faith. Hand washing was a way to show devotion to God before eating bread, which was made from grain likely grown, harvested and sold by pagans. It was an attempt to stay faithful to the meaning of old customs, even if they could not stay true to the letter of the law. But the problem becomes that these attempts almost always become new laws we enforce. Think of all the church traditions we have and justify by saying, ‘because we’ve always done it that way!’

But Jesus points out how one of those traditions – the Corban – actually violates God’s law. You see, in the 10 Commandments, “Honor Your Father and Mother” is critically important especially in ancient society, but it doesn’t mean to say nice things about them and honor them with accolades. No, it meant, don’t speak badly about them, and take care of them in old age. Yet, the Corban allowed a person to relinquish both requirements, by giving an offering to the temple or synagogue instead. Essentially, this both spoke poorly of a person’s parents, in that the public gift was an announcement by the child, that they don’t love their parents and the parents were unfit for their care, and it meant the parents had nothing, no help in their old age.

Jesus’s point isn’t to “One Up” the Pharisees, but to help them see what can happen. The Pharisees and their predecessors made these traditions with the best of intentions, but they do not listen or reconsider the tradition of the Corban when Jesus challenges them. Instead, they make it clear that they are offended by the insinuation by Jesus, as if he is trying to destroy their history, rather than just open their eyes. They don’t see that Jesus was speaking to help them repent of past mistakes in order to move forward. This is why Jesus calls them blind, and questions their leadership, because if people follow them, they will both end up in a pit.

So, what does this mean for you today? How do you treat people who question traditions? How do we treat people who might ask us to reconsider our history? Do we just shut them out or talk over them, accusing them of being unfaithful? The Pharisees had a tough time, because there were a lot of false teachers, especially with the Roman government and pagan cults, but in their vigilance, they fell into the trap of becoming false teachers.

The word of God helps us by giving us a standard to measure by, but we have to be willing to let the Word of God in Jesus, challenge us to rethink how worldly we really are. How do we show the world we are set apart? How do we reveal God’s holiness in us?

Well, I think that to start, when we hear someone challenge our traditions or our history, we could consider the words of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Catholic Jesuits, who advised when defending Catholicism against the Protestants, to always interpret your opponent’s words favorably, with the best intentions. This allows us to understand why they believe what they believe. Ignatius became a force for change within the Catholic church, good changes that recognized valid Protestant complaints. This attitude is why the Roman church has changed and reformed, and we can be in conversation with them, even if we still have valid disagreements.

Now, if Ignatius of Loyola is not particularly memorable to you, consider the words of Thumper, yes, Thumper from Disney's Bambi. Or more accurately, the words of Thumper's parents: "Thumper!" "Yes, Mama" "What did your father tell you?" *"If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all."*

Indeed, the letter of James gives the same advice, to bridle the tongue, and to listen, because the unchecked tongue starts fires, and there is no such thing as human righteous anger, as only God has the right to righteous anger. We often think, like the Pharisees, that we are in a battle to defend God, but then we use the tools of this world to come to God's defense, against God's commands. The words we speak and in this modern era, the things we share on social media, should be used sparingly and used to reveal a heart aligned with Christ, driven by our calling to love one another as Jesus loves us.

The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4 says to live into our calling, means to act with love, gentleness, kindness and humility, bearing with one another in our problems, all to develop a bond of peace and unity. This is what makes us holy, not our history, not what we eat, or our traditions. The Christian life is a practice, meaning that declaring Jesus as our Lord in our life takes practice. We don't just declare it, assume we are saved, and then go back to being just like everyone else in the world, but we also can't expect that by declaring it, everything will be changed immediately.

Indeed, it takes practice and it starts small, and it starts with our humility, the same humility that led the one who is truly Holy and set apart, to become part of the world, to live as a human just like you, and then die for you on the cross, a punishment for rebels, the supreme tool of sin's oppression in ancient Rome. But by his death on the cross, Jesus would conquer sin and, with it, death itself, by rising again to new life on the third day.

Friends, this good news of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us – It is God's love for us. Indeed, by this good news we see that God did not shy away from this broken world, but entered into it for us, and desires to fill us with the Holy Spirit and with love, in order to love God with all we have and love one another as we love ourselves. This should reveal that we are called, that we are set apart, in order to be a testimony to the world not by the law, and certainly not by our flawed history and traditions, but by a revelation of God's love in this world.

Friends, Jesus says that the Pharisees and scribes are not being faithful but being actors. The word hypocrite is another word that has changed in our modern language, to be someone who says to do one thing, but then does another. That is applicable here, but in the Greek of that time, it meant to be an 'actor' or to wear a mask. Our religiosity is but a mask we wear when we use the world's ways, to defend our faith and traditions, even to defend our God.

God has not asked us to use power and anger to defend our faith, when arguing with others. God has not asked us to make excuses, or defend lies and half-truths, on social media. We need to look inwardly, and rest in God's love for ourselves, remembering that we do not need to earn our salvation by defending God. We need to be witnesses to God's salvation already in us, which trusts in God's grace to live with gentleness, faithfulness, joy, peace, patience, kindness, self-control and love.

I saw a post online from a self-professed Christian friend of mine, and it pictured Sam Eliot as Virgil Earp in the classic movie Tombstone, and it read: *'The day is coming when good men are going to have to do bad things.'* Friends, if the day comes that good men feel forced to do bad things, then the 'good' men cease to be 'good men.' If that happens, then we have missed the gospel entirely and it reveals our true hearts, where murder, infidelity, promiscuity, theft, false testimony, and mischaracterizations (blasphemy) rule.

Remember this, when you post or speak out about your opponents in this world, whomever you perceive them to be – the socialists, the capitalists, Democrats, or Republicans – that to speak in the way the world speaks with vulgar language, with threats of revenge or violence, even against alleged criminals, or to make fun of people, dehumanize them, or make them strawmen, by encapsulating complex ideas in pithy bumper sticker slogans, none of this reveal holiness – it reveals worldliness. To unbelievers who have access to scripture and know the words of Christ, it says that the Good News of Jesus Christ means nothing to us, and Jesus is not Lord.

Let us instead, heed the words of our Savior and let him be our Lord, by being more concerned with the words and actions that come out of us, and mindfully practice the fruits of the Spirit so that they are revealed in us. *If you can't say something with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control, then don't say anything at all.* Listen, and consider what that person you don't like is saying, not because you should accept anything they say, but because they too are made in the image of God, and deserve to receive from you God's love and grace. Amen.