

Acts 15:1

“Have you had your heart scrubbed?”

“Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

“⁵Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.’⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question.⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: ‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy

Spirit to them, just as he did to us.⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.’”

How do you get people to be good?

That question perplexes parents, educators, corporate bosses, law officers and citizens.

In a Los Angeles supermarket line, I waited in front of a squirming child who tried to escape the confines of a shopping cart.

I wasn’t sure what to expect from the father overseeing that restless tyke.

“You have been a good boy until now,” he said. “Be that way till we get out of the store. Then you can be free.”



Almost miraculously, and to the credit of the father and son, the little boy sat quietly.

That incident seemed such an exception.

About the same time, I served on the Wilshire YMCA Board of Managers.

One of the board’s chief tasks was fund-raising for “Y” facilities, staff, and programs.

One evening I called at the door of a prominent physician who’d given to the “Y” for several years.

The stately houses in his neighborhood would sell for a hefty sum today.

When I identified myself as a minister, he asked to speak with me in his study.

After he closed his study door, he asked my advice on a matter that vexed him.

His 20 year-old son’s behavior disappointed him.

The doctor asked, “Should I give my son all his inheritance and let him waste it, or should I gradually dole it out to him?”

In Jesus’ parable, the father of the prodigal son dealt with that dilemma, didn’t he?

Getting people to act properly and responsibly remains a staggering task.

Jesus’ teachings and parables center on that matter.

Every day, all day, CNN, NBC, BBC, CBS, ABC, MSNBC, Reuters, Fox and social media weary us with shocking reports.

The question stands:

Is there a way to get folks to act better?

That issue arose in today’s sermon text.

Many Jewish Christians of the time thought that non-Jews must first obey *Old Testament* laws before they could come to Christ.

In about 1850 B.C., the Lord required all Abraham’s male descendants to be circumcised eight days after they were born.

About 400 years later, Israel received the Ten Commandments and the rest of Moses’ law.

In about 45 A.D, not realizing that Christ fulfilled the Law’s requirements for all, legalistic Jewish Christians began arguing with the Apostles and the Jerusalem elders.

Many still don’t understand how Jesus fulfilled the Law for us.

They apparently don’t comprehend the true meaning of God’s grace and faith in Christ.

In addition, they seem not to appreciate why laws alone don’t work.

More laws than any nation in history govern the American people—civil law, corporate law, maritime law, environmental standards, etc.

Federal, state, county, city, and special agencies create codes, laws, and mandates by the millions.

Some seem downright silly.

A few years ago, I met some chemical

engineers whose job was to test for pollution in the Mississippi River.

They said that if you were to take a cup of water out of the Mississippi and pour it back into the river you would violate EPA standards.



Thousands of laws regulate us.

Authorities struggle to get people to obey them.

One columnist noted that the last campaign funding laws the U.S. Congress passed worsened the situation.

On a visit to Zion National Park, Norma and I went to a laundromat in Springdale, UT.

The laundromat was located on private property, which included the residence and other businesses owned by one gentleman.

Everything was neat and clean, but signs everywhere outside and inside the building read: **“Don’t do” this and “Don’t do” that.**

All those signs made me want to violate at least one of the “Don’ts!”

My mother once told me not to do some-thing I’d never even thought of until she warned me.

How do you get people to be good, to improve their behavior?



Laws aren’t perfect, but allowing folks to do as they feel makes things worse.

Equity without God-given morality creates anarchy.

Pride and feelings that we’re exceptional weaken laws’ effects.

Imagine a “What If” situation.

You are a wealthy landowner, holding title to several million acres.

- **Hundreds of persons you love need help.**

- **You parcel out large sections of your land and allow them to live on it with some conditions:**
 1. They must respect you and your property.
 2. They must get along with one another.
- **In a short period of time you check on them.**
 1. You discover that they’ve formed cliques along color, political, and ethnic lines.
 2. They fight, argue and some even kill.
 3. Men abuse women.
 4. Some women use sex to gain favors.
 5. Everyone wants his/her own way.

Happy tenants are rare.¹

Still, you love them and want to help them.

How do you help them change?

- Yell and scream.
- Eliminate the stubborn ones.
- Have them agree to a set lot of laws

Proceed with your best law program and here’s what will happen:

Many people will be checking to make sure others abide by the law.

Some will brag about how well they and their particular group keep the laws.

Have you read about John Calvin’s disastrous efforts to manage Geneva, Switzerland?

¹ Jesus’ parables regularly and rightly compared us to tenants on God’s property.

The entire human race is guilty of pride, ingratitude, and failure to acknowledge our Creator.

“The Law made nothing perfect.”²

**The New Testament tells us Good News
God’s Son came here to live among us, and to
show us the perfect life-example.**

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he (Jesus) himself likewise partook of the same nature.”³

**How does Jesus’ coming to earth help us?
Seeing and following the perfect, loving e.g. of
Jesus profits us eternally.**

We believe in him, put him first and trust his way.

**As Paul wrote: “I have been crucified with
Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ
lives in me: and the life which I now live in
the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God,
who loved me, and gave himself for me.”⁴**

And what about the law?

“Before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, so that we



may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all heirs of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”⁵

**“We live by faith in the Son of God who loved
us and gave himself for *us*.”**

**Jesus died to pay that penalty for our daily
failures—so we can be reinstated with God.**

**Many Christians have somehow gained the
feeling that they are earning credits with God.**

**We should see that each day
our indebtedness to God grows greater.**

Unless we live gracefully trusting that Jesus paid the price to scrub our hearts clean, we shall find ourselves on the outside looking in on the Last Day.

**We learn God’s standards
and live by them; they do not change.
The Law of Moses forbade behavior that our
society tries to normalize.**

Read Leviticus 18 and 19 e.g., to see the actions the Lord regards as abhorrent.

Jesus didn’t relax those standards.

² Hebrews 7:19 NASB

³ Hebrews 2:14 NIV

⁴ Galatians 2:19, 20

⁵ Galatians 3:23-27 NASB See also Ephesians 2:14, 15 & Colossians 2:13, 14.

In many churches now, no one reminds folks of sin or the need to repent.

All people hear is, “Keep believing!” and “God loves you just the way you are.”

No one reminds them that they are responsible to God or that He requires holy lives.

Jesus lived completely for God, obeyed all of God’s commandments, and always glorified Him.

Earnestly seeking God involves your heart.

Recall how Jesus called on people to repent of wrongs and to change their behavior:

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”⁶

If anyone had reason to hate, Jesus did.

His enemies framed him in a kangaroo court. They blindfolded him and struck his face and head.

At his trial, people spit on him; authorities scourged him. That involved a whip with multiple strands of metal or bone which raked across his back on each stroke.

In scourging they whipped Jesus 39 times.



They put a crown of thorns on him. Imagine having someone shove a wreath of thorny rose branches on your head and then mocking you.

On the cross, Jesus asked the Father to forgive his tormentors.

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

Having a clean heart also means that we forgive as Jesus forgave, and we pray for our enemies.

We work to cleanse our hearts of evil thoughts, greed, and pride.

We don’t take vengeance or seek it.

We have faith—we trust God to bring justice.

We “believe that he (God) exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

We clothe ourselves in Jesus’ righteousness; we can claim none of our own, yet His grace suffices.

I pray that we’ll all trust God more and keep our hearts pure.

“Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.”⁷

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⁶ Matthew 15:19 NIV

⁷ Matthew 5:8 NIV