

Last year when we discussed the Parable of the Soils from Matthew 13, I asked the question, “How Is Your Dirt?” Or what’s the condition of our soil? Has Jesus Christ taken root in our hearts and are we producing fruit for the Lord. Last week, we discussed that God does not judge us based on our appearance, but on what’s in our hearts. So this morning I want to build on these discussions by looking at the condition of our heart. Our scripture text is taken from the 15th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, the first twenty verses. Let’s see what Jesus has to say about our hearts.

Read Matthew 15:1-20

A wife became very concerned about her husband’s health. He was a physical wreck, weak, pale and flabby, stressed out, and constantly tired – totally out of shape. So she took him to the doctor for a check-up. When the examination was completed, the doctor came out to the waiting room and said to his wife: “Judy, I don’t like the way your husband looks.” “Neither do I,” she replied, “but he’s good to the children.”

Now there are several different ways to look at this scripture text. A lot of sermons have been preached on the difference between God’s commandments and man’s traditions. The Jews during Jesus’ time had basically two sets of law. First, there were the Ten Commandments that God had given Moses and the Jewish people on Mount Sinai which are recorded in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament.

Then there were all the many rules and regulations that the religious leaders of that time developed over the years, over 700 of them between the time of Moses and Jesus. The Pharisees, like our Congress, had the habit of taking things to the extreme. They had a rule or a checklist for everything. They thought that they could improve upon God’s commandments, but instead made a mess of things. They developed so many rules that it made it hard to live. For example, they had a rule that you could not work on the Sabbath, even going to the extreme of saying that you could not turn over in bed more than seven times. Remember when Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment and He simplified everything by stating: “Love God and love your neighbors.”

The hand washing mentioned here was not a matter of hygiene or safety as recommended during this crisis, but a religious act. The Scribes and Pharisees spent most of their time observing various traditions and considered anyone unclean who failed to follow every letter of their manmade rules, such as not washing your hands before you eat as they accused the disciples of doing. The religious leaders stated that you had to be considered clean under their rules before you could worship and approach God. Thus, to be considered unclean meant that

you could not enter the Temple and worship God. In other words, they created a barrier between God and the people. Do we do the same thing with our rules and rituals?

While the Scribes and Pharisees were strict in observing the religious ceremonies and their rituals, in many cases their hearts were not right with God. Theirs was a religion and not a relationship as it should be. And this is what I want us to look at this morning. As we discussed last Sunday, the point is that what's inside a person is far more important than their outward appearance or how religious they act. Someone said that you can't judge a man by the clothes that he wears; God made one; the tailor made the other.

If you remember the story from last Sunday, when the Old Testament prophet Samuel was examining the sons of Jesse to determine which one would be the next king of Israel, God told him: "Looks aren't everything. Don't be impressed with his appearance or height. I judge people differently than humans do. Men and women look at the face; I look into the heart." You know, you can look as religious and godly as possible on the outside without Christ dwelling in your heart. What's the old saying; you can't judge a book by its cover. Jesus is clearly saying that what really matters is the state of a person's heart; does Christ really dwell there?

Now a literal interpretation of our text this morning would say that you can eat anything you want, put anything into your mouth and it will not hurt you. Of course, we all know that's not true; certain foods and drinks are not good for us, especially if we overindulge, as some of us have experienced over the past five months with "The Quarantine 15."

The real focus of this passage is not what you can or cannot eat or what religious rituals to follow; the main focus is on the spiritual condition of one's heart. Now to properly understand this text, we need to remember that in biblical times, the heart was considered to be the center of the person; the place that determined the very nature and character of the person; the center of all thoughts and decisions. Today, of course, we use the terms "mind" and "soul," as well as heart to describe the nature and characteristics of a person. Jesus realized that the single most destructive disease, the single most devastating illness for human beings, is sickness from within – the sickness of the heart and soul.

Remember whatever a person allows to occupy their mind will sooner or later determine what they will say and do. The mind is like the stomach in some ways. It's not how much you put into it that counts, but how much it digests. If a person thinks about something long enough, they will soon come to a stage when they cannot stop thinking about it at all. Those naughty little thoughts may someday result in serious harmful sins. Thus, our outward appearance and actions are directly related to our inner thoughts. If your heart is a toxic waste dump, it will soon leak out.

Robert Waldo Emerson was correct in stating that “a man is what he thinks about all day long.” Here’s another way to put it: watch your thoughts, they become words; watch your words, they become actions; watch your actions, they become habits; watch your habits, they become character; watch your character, it becomes your destiny.

Those who diet sometimes feel that just thinking about food adds inches to their waistline. Of course, thinking about food does not actually add pounds, but it does increase our appetite. Our thoughts can also stimulate other appetites that can eventually get us into trouble. To control our behavior, we must first control our thoughts. This is why Jesus focused on what’s inside a person rather than how they look. As we discussed last week, when God measures a person, He puts a tape around their heart, not their head or waistline.

In the nineteenth verse of our text, Jesus gives us a list of wrongs or sins that closely relate to the last six Ten Commandments. He implies that out of the heart can come evil thoughts or intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, and slander. Now we don’t have time to cover all of these wrongs, but I would like to start with evil thoughts because all the other ones are a direct result of letting evil get a foothold in our minds. If you let bitterness and resentment take root in the soil of your mind, then there is the possibility that thoughts of murder may emerge. In the same way, if you let envy and greed dwell in your mind, this could lead to stealing. Likewise, many marriages and relationships have been destroyed because of improper sexual and lustful thoughts on the part of one or both partners.

And then there are our words, who of us have not said something that we soon regretted. Remember the old saying: “It is much wiser to choose what you say than to say what you choose.” An old country doctor always began his examination by saying: “Let me see your tongue.” Now this is a good way to start the examination of anybody. Proverbs 21:23 states: “To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble.” Think about it, words from the tongue can lift people up, encourage them when things are going wrong, comfort those who are hurting, and exhort others on to victory in life. But at the same time, we have all at some time hurt someone by our unkind and thoughtless words. Our words both bless God and curse those who are made in the image of God. While we humans have learned to control and tame wild animals, we have never quite mastered our own words. The poison spewing from an untamed tongue is lethal in any dosage.

We spend three years learning to talk and then the rest of our life trying to control our words. Think about this: over the past year, if someone had paid you ten dollars for every kind word you ever spoke about another person, and also collected five dollars for every unkind word, would you be richer or poorer today? The Christian should learn two things about his tongue – how to hold it and how to use it.

Here are some quotes that I found on the spoken word: 1) words once spoken can never be recalled; 2) always keep your words soft and sweet – one day you may have to eat them; 3) the mind is like a TV set; when it goes blank, it's a good idea to turn the sound off; 4) a lot of indigestion is caused by people eating their own words.

Now the computer has been invented in our lifetime. And of course, as most of us know there are two main parts of the computer: the hardware which is the mechanical and electrical parts, and the software which is the programs that operate and give instructions to the hardware. There is an old saying about software and input: "garbage in equals garbage out." That means if the software is crummy the output, like the images that appear on the computer screen, will be crummy also. No matter how advanced the hardware is, if the program or input is faulty, the output will be bad as well.

The same can be said about humans. When you think about it, the first computer was really invented by God when He created the human mind. In many ways our minds resemble a computer; the mind is like the software that controls our bodies and lives. Our minds can be trained by the best schools. We can read a library full of books and earn multiple degrees, but if we allow evil thoughts to exist in our minds, our actions and lives will be evil too.

As we need to protect our personal computers from viruses, so must we protect our minds from things that will contaminate them. God wants to be the programmer of our minds. When we focus our minds on Jesus, and love the Lord with all our hearts, our actions will be transformed by our right thinking. In the eighth verse of the fourth chapter of Philippians, the Apostle Paul gives us an anti-virus program for constructing a firewall for our thought pattern. Listen to these words of wisdom: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." We need to fill our minds with things that are noble, sincere and gracious – the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to criticize. In other words, look for the best in others.

I heard a story about a monastery that had fallen on hard times. There were only five monks left and all of them were over seventy years old. In the woods near the monastery was a hut that a Jewish rabbi from a nearby town would occasionally visit. One day out of desperation, the head monk went to visit the rabbi in hope of getting some advice on how to save his dying monastery.

The rabbi said: "I really don't have any advice for you. The only thing I can tell you is that one of you could be the Messiah." When the head monk returned to the monastery, the other monks gathered around him and asked what the rabbi said; did he have any suggestions for helping

the monastery? “No, he couldn’t help us. We just wept and prayed and read the Scriptures. However, he did say something right before I was leaving that was odd. He said that one of us might be the Messiah. But I don’t know what he meant by that statement.”

In the months that followed, each of the old monks pondered the rabbi’s words. The Messiah? One of us? But if that is so, which one? As they thought about this, the old monks began to treat one another with extraordinary love and respect – just in case one of them was really the Lord. Because the forest near the monastery was quite beautiful, people from the nearby town would come there to picnic and play. Occasionally, some of them would enter the old monastery, and they began to sense the extraordinary love and respect that now surrounded the five old monks – love that bound them together and radiated from them, filling the surrounding atmosphere. The people told their friends, and they came and brought others. Soon some of the younger men asked if they could join the monks. And then others joined. So within a few years, the once dying monastery had come to life as never before.

Do you see what the rabbi was talking about? When we treat one another with love and respect, when we focus on love and not rules, when our thoughts are pure and honorable towards others, when we look for the best in others, when we look for Jesus in others, then it not only binds us together but it binds other people to Christ. Think about it, if each one of us will make a commitment to practice what Jesus and Paul were talking about, we can enhance not only this church, but also this community. Let’s start looking for Jesus in each other and those we encounter each day, and see the difference it can make in each of our lives and our relationships. May we all have healthy and pure hearts. Amen