

August 29, 2021

Texts: Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Title: “A Heart for God”

I’ve got a question this morning for all you history buffs. What is something that was declared illegal 100 years ago, but is perfectly legal today? I’m referring to the period from 1920 to 1933 known as the Prohibition Era when all the bars and saloons and liquor stores in the nation shut down. Or did they? As many of you know, the 18th Amendment just drove it underground. I read that in the city of Los Angeles, California alone there were approximately 30,000 illegal saloons, twice the number of legal bars that had been operation before the law was passed. The mayor of Los Angeles at that time was involved in the illegal liquor trade himself along with others who were charged with enforcing the law.

It would be easy to laugh at that kind of hypocrisy—if it weren’t so prevalent today as well. I’ll give you a well-known example. During the worst months of the COVID pandemic, the mayor of Austin Texas recorded a video urging people to avoid travel or large gatherings. “Stay home if you can,” he said. He sounded like a responsible leader until it came to light that he’d recorded it from his vacation in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico.

And of course, we roll our eyes in disgust when we catch a prominent person in a something like that. But we all have problems with moral and ethical consistency. We all fail to meet our own standards sometimes. That’s not an excuse, it’s a reality. Somehow our hypocrisy radar fails us when we point it at ourselves. And it’s an especially difficult issue for those of us who are known as

followers of Christ. Because people will watch us and draw conclusions about the character of God and the authenticity of our faith by how well our words and actions match up to God's standards. It's a tough position to be in.

A few years ago, a young man named Tyler started an Instagram page called PreachersNSneakers. Tyler began posting pictures of prominent, often younger pastors and worship leaders leading church services while wearing designer clothes and sneakers worth hundreds or thousands of dollars. Tyler said, "I'm a Christian and I feel strongly about the leaders of the church and how high of a calling they have. I started questioning myself, 'What is OK as far as optics...as far as pastors wearing hype or designer clothing?'"

Our Bible passage today has to do with a question of "optics." The Pharisees and some teachers of the law noticed that Jesus and his disciples weren't following the Jewish laws of ceremonial hand washing before they ate. Aha! The Pharisees thought they had caught Jesus breaking the religious rules. Surely this invalidated his authority as a religious leader! Instead of hanging his head in shame, Jesus turned the tables on the Pharisees.

He said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."

The hypocrisy Jesus was talking about with the Pharisees was that they said all the right things, but they weren't motivated by the heart of God. By their attitude and their emphasis, they were driving people away from God not to

mention that it was cheating themselves out of a more genuine spirituality

Now the Pharisees get quite a bad rap for their sins but listen to this; they were doing what they thought was right but they missed the point about faith in God. But what about us? For we're human beings too. We can miss the point and not know it. It's always easier to follow Christ in word but it's a much greater and more valuable and powerful thing when we can take it to heart and align our thoughts and actions with his teachings.

I remember a parent many years ago saying to me referring to his daughter, "We raised her in Church, but we didn't raise her in Christ." It's possible to listen to a lifetime of sermons and yet still miss the life-transforming joy of knowing God and sharing his love with others. Remember when the Pharisees asked Jesus to name the greatest commandment? Jesus didn't point to a rule or a religious observance or a church tradition. He pointed to a relationship. He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ...and secondly, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Jesus is saying, "God isn't pointing you toward the Law. The Law is pointing you toward God. To the extent that we understand God and submit our lives to Him, to the extent that we love God more than we love our own lives, then it becomes a matter of the heart not so much about following the rules and traditions.

When some of the great medieval cathedrals were built, like Notre Dame in

Paris, most of the population of Europe was illiterate. Architects, sculptors and artists created these amazing cathedrals full of carvings and statues and stained glass windows to tell the story of God through art. They assumed that the average citizen may never read a Bible, but they could “read” the story of God through the images in the church buildings. My last congregation had stained glass window all around that told the story of Jesus from his birth to his resurrection.

This morning I’m reminding us, all of us, myself included that we are a kind of cathedral as far as being places where the message of Jesus is seen. The most effective way to spread the message is the way we live our lives. Always has been. Always will be. Let’s never forget this. It’s our calling. It will be our legacy. Perfection? No. No such thing. But living with a heart for God? You bet! Amen.