



THE PARABLES OF JESUS

THE CLEAN AND THE UNCLEAN

Before Life Group

Read [Mark 7:14-23](#)

The Pharisees highly valued strict adherence to the law. For the Pharisees, faith was expressed through obedience to the word of God, an idea they initially embraced with a good heart. Yet, as their religious rule continued, the leaders continually added to the law. They heaped more and more requirements on the people beyond what they could endure. The belief persisted that each person should be judged by the actions he displayed on the outside. Jesus, however, having a greater understanding of the intended purpose of the law, gave a different interpretation.

Although Jesus spoke to the crowds using simple parables, the message of the parables was anything but subtle. The Pharisees heaped laws on the people who were earnestly trying to follow God, but Jesus was about to expose their error. Where the Pharisees stressed outward obedience, Jesus sought to first pursue inward motivation. The Pharisees, in their constant adding to the law, piled on the outward requirements in a misguided attempt to control the behavior of the followers. Furthermore, although the religious leaders projected an image of moral superiority and demanded outward obedience, they themselves were unable to keep the laws. They focused on the outer man while simultaneously ignoring the inner man of the heart.

Thus, Jesus, spoke to them in a thinly veiled parable, comparing the stomach to the heart in order to show the nature of actions and the origin of sin. We have all tasted disgusting foods at some time or another, possibly even to the point of becoming sick. But these sicknesses pass, because the stomach processes the food and then removes it from the body. Jesus focused on the condition of the heart. Physical sickness is one thing, but the sickness of a heart plagued by sin is more devastating. It is the heart that defiles a person and makes him unclean.

The Heart of the Issue

People are commonly encouraged to “follow your heart” when making decisions and complicated choices. We are advised to see how our heart “feels” about a certain situation. While this may seem like sound, solid and somewhat spiritual advice, we see in the Parable of the Clean and Unclean that following the heart results in a defiled lifestyle. “For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.” ([Mark 7:21-22, NIV](#)) Our hearts have stood against God from the outset of time and it is these same hearts that God redeems.

In the Parable of the Clean and the Unclean, Jesus lays out the issue abundantly clear. It is not the externality of our actions that defiles us, rather the motivation and desire behind those actions that reveals who we are

and the depth of our relationship with God. Our actions alone are incapable of producing a change of heart, no matter how fervently we strive to do the right thing. Even if we manage to obey the law fully—impossible, to be sure—our heart would still be defiled, corrupt and unholy as we stand before the Lord.

In following Christ, the Christian should surrender his heart to the will of God, taking the things he craves and the things he desires and laying them plainly at the foot of the cross, asking God to purify him completely of everything that defiles him. There is no temptation or sin so atrocious from which God is unable to redeem His people. When we bring him everything that we are, when we surrender our hearts and allow the Spirit of God to reside in the deepest corners of our being, the very nature of who we are and what we do is transformed.

Obedience and Legalism

The Pharisees demanded strict adherence to the law in order to produce righteousness inside of a person. Anything short of that standard meant a person had been defiled. They added laws upon laws to prevent a person from sinning, but in doing so they created a system in which everyone defiled himself beyond the expectation of God's law. The Pharisees designed the system of legalism so that it became more important to act correctly than to submit to the Heavenly Father. Christianity is not about following a mindless set of religious rules, but about a deepening and transformative connection with God who reveals Himself to the world and makes Himself available.

It is often said that Christianity is a "relationship not a religion." But this dichotomy is relatively new in the history of the faith. For centuries the two terms were not at odds with one another. People don't have a problem with religion per se, they have a problem with legalism. They have a problem when the empty ritual and expression of faith supersedes the subject of our faith: God. Obedience to God is not a bad thing; it is the sign of a mature faith. Legalism occurs when adherence to the law becomes more important than the one the law points to. Additional laws, rules and regulations gave the Pharisees a false and inaccurate sense of superiority.

The same is true of us in our daily walk. Legalism may be what we look to as the law for our salvation. Obedience, however, is the result of looking to our Savior to lead us and heal us. Our obedience is rooted in the transformative grace that comes from Jesus Christ. Christ in us stirs up inside our core a Holy passion for the things of God. The more room we allow for the Holy Spirit to move inwardly and shape our heart, the more that change is seen outwardly. But it is first and foremost our heart that is shaped and our spiritual DNA that is altered. Ultimately, we will reflect the glory of God through our thoughts, our words, and our actions. And this cannot be described as cold legalism. This is the direct result of a God who has liberated us, rescued us from the grips of death and made us new according to His glorious will.



Discussion Questions

Read [Mark 7:14-23](#)

1. In the passage surrounding the parable, what were some of the criticisms that Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing? Why were these particularly troublesome to the people of God?
2. How do the things that come out of a person defile him as opposed to the things a person puts inside of himself?
3. What is the relationship between a person's heart and a person's actions? How are the two connected? How are they not connected?
4. What is the difference between obedience and legalism? Why is it crucial that we not confuse these two concepts? How does obedience reveal our heart towards God?
5. What things does Jesus say are products of a heart of flesh? How does Jesus redeem us eternally from being bound by these desires? How do the desires of our heart compare to the riches and glory that come from God?
6. Where do you struggle the most with giving your heart fully to God? Where is the biggest temptation for obedience to God in your life? What role does grace play in our renewed life?

About the Author.

Pastor Daniel Burton lives in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. In May 2015, Daniel graduated from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary with his Master of Divinity. It was here that he began to explore his passion for Theology and deeper exploration of the word of God. Daniel believes that, at its core, Theology should be fun. Check out more of his work at <http://thegospeloutpost.com>

