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Matthew 23:25 - 23:28



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage from the book of Matthew, Steve Gregg discusses the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who focused on outward displays of cleanliness but were corrupt inside. Jesus compares them to cups and dishes that are clean on the outside, but full of greed and self-indulgence on the inside. Gregg emphasizes the importance of true inner cleanliness and not just outward religiosity, calling for a change in behavior and a focus on personal transformation rather than seeking religious reputation.

Transcript

We'll be turning today to Matthew chapter 23, and I'd like to read verses 25 through 28. Well, this is not a very flattering statement, nor were any of the things that Jesus said in this discourse flattering to the Pharisees. Again and again, he says, woe unto you.

He calls them hypocrites, but he doesn't just keep it vague. He gets down to particulars. He gets down to specifics of their behavior that show them to be hypocrites.

The word hypocrite means a play actor, one who's not sincere. And so how does he illustrate their insincerity here? Well, they're being inconsistent. They clean, he says, the outside of the cup and the dish.

Now, this is a reference to the ceremonial cleanness fetish that the Pharisees were exhibited. There were certain ways in which under the Jewish religion a person could be made ceremonially unclean. This ceremonial uncleanness was not the same thing as sin.

A person could be quite innocently unclean ceremonially, for example, if they got leprosy or a woman on her period or a man who had a wet dream. These were some conditions that the Bible said would make a man or a woman unclean for a certain period of time. God certainly does not hold it against people that they have these conditions come upon them, and it was not a matter of moral guilt before God.

The ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were there in order to teach things symbolically. And no doubt, those things that were called ceremonially unclean probably did symbolize sin in the sense that there were lessons to be learned about how sin

affects people from seeing what God said about leprosy and some of these other conditions. One of the things was that if a person contracted ritual uncleanness, they would for a period of time not go to the tabernacle, and they would also not be able to have human contact until they were clean again.

And that would usually be until evening they were unclean, and then they'd wash and be normal, or in some cases they might be unclean for as much as a week. Or if they had an ongoing condition like leprosy or an issue of blood or something like that, then of course they'd be unclean until that was over. But the point is that God didn't really hold people guilty of sin when these conditions came upon them.

It was just a matter of showing by keeping these people isolated during a period of uncleanness, symbolically showing what sin does to people. If you do commit sin, you are morally unclean, and it separates you from God's worship, and it separates you in many respects from people as well. It alienates you.

And so I believe the whole laws of ceremonial uncleanness were there to symbolize certain spiritual things. But the person who had accidentally contracted or without any fault of his own contracted uncleanness was not in danger of losing his relationship with God. He just had to follow a certain ceremonial reaction to it in order to carry out the symbolism of what was being portrayed there.

Well, contact with unclean things would make a person unclean under that ceremonial system. This system, of course, does not exist anymore among Christians, but it was part of the Jewish religion. And if, for example, let us take a woman who has her menstrual period, that was a condition that would be considered unclean.

Whatever she wore, whatever she sat on while in that condition would also be made unclean. If a woman in such a condition sat on a certain chair and later went somewhere else and a man sat on that chair, he was unclean. So you can see that contact with things unclean would transmit ceremonial uncleanness, theoretically, in the way that law was set up.

Well, that being so, of course, if somebody who was unclean had touched a bowl or a dish or anything, a table, that would make that thing unclean. Now, the Pharisees had added things to the Scripture and had decided to define more broadly what would make people unclean, and they considered that contact with a Gentile would make you unclean, or with a Samaritan, or even walking on the land of a Gentile or Samaritan would make you unclean. The dust that would cling to your feet would be unclean.

Some of the Pharisees actually believed that even a wind that passes over Samaria and comes into Jerusalem and blows on you would make you unclean. Now, these things went far beyond the teachings of the Scripture and were just human traditions, but because the Pharisees took these traditions seriously, their whole life was one of

uncleanness. You couldn't go outside without conceivably brushing against a Gentile or having a wind blow from Samaria across your face, and everything you touched would be unclean.

And so, they just began to wash things, because that's in the law how you overcame uncleanness. At the end of a period of uncleanness, you would wash yourself and so forth. So, they just developed a habit of washing everything.

They washed their cups and their bowls and their tables and everything, just in case. Just in case they had been defiled. Now, this became a real fetish with them.

Every time they came in from outdoors, they had a special ceremonial washing they went through. And every utensil they touched, they had to wash and all. And it became really a fetish for them.

Jesus refers to this practice of washing cups and dishes and so forth here. And he says to them, he says, You Pharisees, you cleaned the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Now, when Jesus talks about a cup or a dish full of extortion or self-indulgence, what we realize is he's speaking metaphorically.

Because you don't really fill a cup or a dish with such things as extortion. Extortion is the crime of forcing somebody to do what you want them to do under threat of harming them if they do not. If you say, do such and such thing, or else I'll burn your house down, or I'll kill you, or I'll do something else that'll be hurtful to you.

That's extortion. And the Pharisees apparently were guilty of extortion and other sins, of course. Self-indulgence, he mentions.

Now, extortion and self-indulgence is not really something you put into a cup or a dish. Although, of course, what you put into your cup or dish might well manifest your self-indulgence if you're a glutton or a drunkard. But the point he's making is this, that the washing of the outside of a dish here is not really referring to their literal practice of washing literal cups and dishes.

He uses that expression because they did that on a regular basis, but he's comparing their own selves with cups and dishes. They wash their outward behavior, but inwardly, they are filled with extortion and self-indulgence and sin. The idea is that they clean up their outward behavior.

They follow the outward forms that the law requires them to do, but they do not change inwardly. They are just as sinful and corrupt inside as can be. And Jesus is essentially, by way of metaphor, likening this to them going in and washing the outside of the cup before they drink from it.

But what's in the cup is foul. What's in the cup is putrid. What's in the cup is totally

unclean and unacceptable.

And Jesus further amplifies this concept with the illustration of being like whitewashed tombs. You see, a whitewashed tomb looks, as he says, beautiful on the outside. Newly painted.

It's all white. Now, you realize that a tomb in biblical times was not exactly like a grave in our modern society. A tomb was usually a cave.

People would use caves or even make caves in order to bury their dead in them. Now, there were certain times of the year at special Jewish festivals where Jewish people from all over the Mediterranean world would make pilgrimages to Jerusalem. And there were, of course, many caves in the region.

And caves might be used for a number of things. They might be used for burial places, but they also might be used for places to go to the bathroom. That's what Saul did in the days when David was hiding in the cave.

Saul went in to relieve himself in a cave. It was a place where some privacy could be had. And therefore, journeyers coming to Jerusalem and seeing a cave might not know instantly whether this was a cave they could use for such purposes or whether it was a burial place.

You see, in the law of Moses, one of the things that would make you defile yourself would be if you came into contact with a dead body. Even touching a tomb is sufficient contact with the dead body to defile you. Now, it would be really disastrous if a Jew, let us say from Corinth, was making a journey to Jerusalem to keep the feast of Pentecost, let's say.

And on the way there, he stopped into a cave to use the facilities. And it turned out that cave was a tomb. And he didn't know it because he would then be defiled for a whole week because of his contact with the tomb or a place where a dead body was.

That would mean he couldn't participate at all in the festival because he'd be unclean for the whole week. That would have really been a disaster for him. So, in order to prevent that kind of inadvertent defilement of travelers coming into the Jerusalem area, as the feasts began to approach, as the time of the feast began to draw near, many of the tombs around the Jerusalem area were whitewashed.

They were painted white by the locals so that they might be recognized for what they are as tombs and that people would not inadvertently go in and use them and get defiled. So, the painting of tombs white was what was done to remedy this situation. And so, when Jesus said the Pharisees were like whitewashed tombs, he wasn't making up an imaginary image.

He was referring to something they were very familiar with, the whitewashing of tombs. Now, once you have painted the outside of the tomb white, it's clean, it's beautiful. It's, you know, it doesn't look like something that would defile you.

But if you were to look inside that tomb, it is full of death. It's full of dead man's bones. And to the Jew, that means uncleanness.

You touch an unclean dead body and you're made unclean. You become defiled by contact with it. Now, Jesus says, boy, is that ever a good illustration of you guys.

You guys, in your outward appearance, are like the outside of a cup or dish that's been washed or the outside of a tomb that's been whitewashed. Clean as can be, squeaky clean. You look like, you know, you're the purest of people from the outside.

But when one looks inside, what one finds is that you people are full of extortion. You're full of self-indulgence. You're full of sin.

And contact with you will defile people. You're like tombs that are filled with dead man's bones and all uncleanness. And so what Jesus is saying is that the Pharisees are like stealth corruptors.

They corrupt people by contact with them, but they don't look like it. They're incognito. They are disguised as pure, righteous people.

But because their outward behavior is scrupulous, but inwardly, they neglect, as he said in the earlier woe, the weightier matters of the law, righteousness, mercy and faithfulness. They inside, they are evil and corrupting persons. Outside, they're religious and careful to not do anything that someone would notice by looking at them that would give them away as being persons who are wicked.

So a person can be a total hypocrite in this respect that their religiosity is external merely. And that is what Jesus said they were. Now, religious externalism is a big problem.

It's not just a problem the Pharisees had. It exists among Christians and people of other religions as well. In fact, any religion probably has its share of hypocrites.

I have a number of friends who are missionaries among Muslims, and I've been told that many Muslims are very much like the Pharisees in this very respect. There's certain requirements, outward requirements, rituals that the Muslims are required to perform. Bowing down toward Mecca several times a day is one of those things.

Another thing would be making a pilgrimage to Mecca. Another thing would be to fast during Ramadan. Ramadan is a 40-day fast of the Muslims.

And my friends who labor among Muslims on the mission field say that, you know, most

Muslims, at least as far as others can observe, make every attempt to keep these outward things because that's what their religion requires. But they say that in talking to most of these people, the people have no real heart for the things. You will find exceptions, of course.

Some Muslims sincerely love Allah, but there's many, just like the Pharisees, who in their hearts, they are as wicked as can be and as contrary to the spirit of their religion as they can be. Now, this is not a defect simply in Islam. This is not a criticism of that religion particularly, although obviously I don't agree with it.

It is simply a criticism of human nature and of religion in general. And that is that most men have a religious instinct that makes them want to be right with God, if possible. But they also have selfishness.

Basically, most people want to do their own thing. They want to seek their own happiness. They live to please themselves.

Now, most people don't want to be completely without any religion because they feel that religion somehow commends them to God. And when they die, they just as soon have God on their side when they face Him at judgment. But at the same time, many people do not want to pay much of a price for this.

They still want to live their lives in a way to please themselves. I suspect that this is because although they want to have the bases covered in case there's a God to answer to when they die, they don't have an awful lot of faith that there is such a God watching them every moment and monitoring their thoughts. And so, I mean, they're not really sure there's a God.

They might say they're sure that there's a God for fear of sounding like atheists, but they live their lives in a way that makes it clear that they don't really believe that there's a God who cares about everything they do and everything they think and everything they say and will judge, as it says in Scripture, every thought and every idle word that a man speaks. The fact that people have some kind of doubts that God really is there seems to make it make them not want to pay any serious price, more than they have to, to please such a hypothetical God. They don't want to be seen totally as atheists or irreligious because there just might be a God to reckon to, but they're not so sure.

And so, they pay the minimum requirement that they define as what God certainly must require of all people. And if they are raised in a Muslim culture, then that would be defined in terms of outward Muslim rituals. If they are raised in the Jewish culture, that would be defined in terms of the Pharisaic practices and keeping the ceremonial law and so forth.

If raised in a Christian culture, that might mean they go to church, at least on Christmas

and Easter, and maybe even more often than that, maybe very regular in church. It might mean that they pay their tithes. It might mean that they volunteer to do some good works once in a while, maybe to help out a soup kitchen or a crisis pregnancy center, or maybe they give to charity.

And they do a few of these things because they consider that these are the things that visibly make them appear to be religious, and they hope that if there's a God, he'll pay attention to those things. But many people, as I say, don't really believe in their hearts that there's a God monitoring every thought, word, and deed they do, and that he's going to cause them to answer for it on the Day of Judgment. And so in their heart of hearts, in their secret heart, and sometimes even in outward behavior when no one is watching, they behave totally contrary to the things God has said and that their religion teaches.

But that's because they want to. They're still living for themselves. You see, there's only really two religions in the world.

There is that which serves and loves and worships God through Jesus Christ, and there is that which serves and loves and worships self. There's really only two rival gods. There's the real God, and then there's self.

And everybody by nature worships self. That's why we need to be converted. We need to have our heart changed.

We need to have God do a supernatural work of taking out our stony heart and giving us a soft heart, of writing his laws in our hearts, because we need to be changed fundamentally. Otherwise, even our religion will simply be an exercise in self-pleasing, self-serving, maybe if only in the sense that we're seeking a religious reputation for ourselves. It takes a change of nature to come to a point where you care not for yourself, but you care for the interests of God alone.

These Pharisees had not had such a change, and therefore they kept the outward requirements of the law as best they felt like they needed to, and inwardly they remained unchanged. And Jesus compared this to a cup that's washed on the outside but full of putrefaction on the inside, or a tomb that's obviously full of dead men's bones which would defile a man by contact with them, but cleaned up and whitewashed on the outside. Certainly, there are many lives in all religious systems that do that.

They conform outwardly to religious requirements, but inside they remain unchanged. They're still full of, as Jesus said, self-indulgence, self-will, self-life. Now, Jesus did say in verse 26, you blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and the dish that the outside of them may be clean also.

He's not talking about literal cups and dishes. He's talking about their lives. Get the

inside clean, and then the outside will be clean naturally.

You see, if you're wicked in your heart, you may yet clean up your act. And that's all it is, is an act. You're an actor, a hypocrite.

But you can clean up your act even if your heart is wicked. However, you'll always be going against your nature. If your heart is wicked, you're going to want to do wicked things, and you will not be happy at all about doing the clean thing on the outside when your heart is dirty, but you may still be compelled by pressure, social pressure or otherwise, to do what's right.

But if you get your heart clean, then you will naturally do outwardly the things that are clean. And that's what Jesus said. Get the inside clean, and then you will have the outside clean too.

You do not get the inside clean by cleaning the outside. By doing religious acts and keeping religious rituals, you will not get your heart clean. Your heart is made clean only when you humble yourself in the sight of God, repent of your whole life of sinfulness and of self-indulgence, and surrender to Jesus Christ as your Lord and say, all that I am, I owe to you, and you can have me.

My heart is yours. Change me. Give me your Holy Spirit to come regenerate me and fill me with your nature, with the divine nature, so that I might be clean inside, and then I can be clean outside consistently and genuinely.

This is what God is looking for. David knew this, even though he lived under the Old Testament. In Psalm 51, he says, you desire, speaking to God, he said, you desire truth in the inward parts.

God is concerned about the way you are inside. Of course, he's concerned about the way you are outside also. But if you are clean inside, Jesus said, you will be clean on the outside as well.

That is, your behavior will conform to the righteousness of your motives and of your heart. But God is not impressed by outward behavior that is clean when the heart is corrupt. Remember, man looks on the outward appearance, as God told Samuel the prophet, but God looks on the heart.

God looks on your heart right now. Is it clean? That's what you need to be concerned with, not your religiosity on the outside.