

Opening Prayer

O Lord may these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight,

Help us to hear your word, to understand your word, and to accept your word into our hearts.

Amen

Introduction

In the early 1980s I worked in the IT department of the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) in a devoutly Islamic country, Saudi Arabia.

In this country there is a group of people known as the Mutaween translated as “The one who makes others obey”

They are officially known as the “Ministry of Interior for Public Safety”.

But they are also known locally by the expatriates as the “Religious Police”.

Every so often this department would send out instructional memos to all foreign workers and I would like to read one of those to you, so you can see what their role was.

“It has been increasingly noticed recently many foreign workmen go about outdoors virtually naked in front of women in public places such as markets, streets and shopping stores, especially those who wear shorts.

Further their wives, who appear either alone or accompanied by their husbands, wear either short clothes which sometimes reveal the lower legs and arms or light clothes which reveal the features of the body.

Since most of these workmen are familiar with the country’s laws and the pertinent disciplinary ethical teaching, this behavior on their part is indicative of the feelings of superiority of their customs to those of this country with the inevitable conclusion of disrespect for our customs.

Anyone caught in this situation will be deported immediately without further ado, and the agency responsible for him will be punished.”

Although we lived in the Aramco compound in Dhahran we were near to the city of Dammam, a center of religious and ethical teaching, and we too were subject to the content of those memos.

On a Thursday or Friday, the Saudi weekend, if a woman was in town and her legs, arms or ankles were showing she was stopped by the religious police.

She was not actually arrested and deported as threatened in the memo, but armed with cans of black paint, they would spray her to make sure she was covered from head to foot.

Aramco also issued practices based on local traditions supporting the religious laws.

One example of this is “*When driving up to the brow of a hill or a bend be prepared to move off the road as oncoming vehicles may be in your lane*”.

This practice is based on local drivers thinking if it is their time to go to paradise they will go, but if not, then fatal accidents will not happen.

They had so much faith they did not really think of others.

In Saudi Arabia today, as in Israel in Jesus time, there are strictly enforced moral, religious, sanitary, ceremonial and civil laws and practices.

Both the Islamic and Jewish laws are based on the Torah, the laws given by God to Israel in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

The most important laws were the Ten Commandments, but there were also hundreds of other rules, regulations, and traditions the Jewish Rabbis added over the centuries

This was passed down orally from generation to generation and eventually written down in a book called the Mishnah.

Background

These original laws were given to the Jews by God after the exodus from Egypt.

And by Jesus time they too had their own Religious Police, the Pharisees, to tell them how to interpret and apply the laws and traditions.

These Pharisees also redefined God’s decrees according to their own way of thinking and demanded everybody live accordingly.

The Mishna even decrees, ‘*It is a greater offense to teach anything contrary to the voice of the Rabbis than to contradict Scripture itself.*’”

They accused anybody who didn’t follow these rules of not honoring God.

But Jesus’ didn’t recognize or obey these oral laws, and this became a setting for Jesus to give us some important truth about tradition, righteousness, and sin.

Accusation

In our passage today, we hear of Jesus tangling with some of the Pharisees who cherished the laws and tradition more than the Word of God.

The Pharisees had been keeping a close watch on Jesus and the disciples, seeking any means to accuse them.

And now they witnessed the disciples eating bread without washing their hands.

So, they asked “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

Jesus knows when the Pharisees ask why some of his disciples do not wash their hands, the question is not an innocent one.

Response

They are really accusing Jesus of not following the law himself, of acting as if he believes himself to be above the law.

Knowing this, Jesus responds with a rebuke from Isaiah (Isaiah 7:6-7), which changes the direction of the conversation: "*This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*" (Mark 7:6).

The Isaiah passage introduces a contrast between what people say and what they do.

And Jesus builds on this contrast to transform the issue into one about defilement and how a human body becomes polluted.

This reproach is more than a condemnation of their empty worship practices.

It is a condemnation of the Pharisees and their narrow-minded adherence to the laws rather than to the intent of God's word.

Tradition

Their righteousness was an outward show, a front which lacked real substance.

Unfortunately, such practices continue today, and our world is filled with those who hold onto outdated religious traditions and practices.

But the Jews aren't the only ones who have replaced or added to the Word of God with traditions.

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have also added traditions and rituals, and some of these seem ridiculous to us today.

For instance, John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian Church, always wore a hat to church and only removed it to pray. So, for several hundred years men in the Presbyterian Church wore hats in church and always removed them to pray.

But according to biographers, the reason John Calvin originally wore a hat, was because his church in Strasbourg was open and cold. There were also many pigeons roosting, and there was always danger of being bombed by them.

Hopefully, it wouldn't happen during prayers!

For centuries, just to be safe, men all wore hats during services in Presbyterian churches.

Defilement

But hand-washing, food, and dressing up are not the main concern here, it's more about who we are, what really defiles us and makes us unclean.

Jesus asserts we should be more concerned about restraining evil and avoiding defilement through sin. He says, "*There is nothing outside a person that he going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, where evil intentions come*"

He says evil and defilement are not external, they stem from places deeply embedded within our very selves.

Conclusion

Our passage today ends with a small representative list of evil deeds, character traits and attitudes, all capable of making a person impure.

Jesus used this occasion about clean and unclean traditions to teach us about the source of human sin.

The heart is understood to be the center of human will and rationality, the place from which all our intentions arise, and from where our moral choices are made.

The good news is Jesus died on the Cross, so that we could receive a spiritual heart-transplant.

A change of heart!

So, how does he do this, how does this apply to us today?

Well, let me give you an example.

Earlier this year, I received an email from someone which disrupted my carefully made plans.

I was very angry when I wrote a well worded and cutting email response.

But before I pressed the send button I had a nagging feeling something was not right.

When I reread the original email, I was able to see the person who sent it was offering help, but my heart felt response was written in pride and anger.

And as James says in our 2nd reading “*Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness*”.

Putting my pride and anger aside I was able to amend my response to be kinder and more effective.

God certainly gave me a change of heart that day and changed a situation which could have become an email feud, into an honest and open relationship.

And God is constantly at work reshaping our hearts to change what is inside us, to be able us to show our love for Him and our neighbors in our actions.

If we remember one thing from this passage this week, before we speak, press send on the email, or act we all make sure our words and our actions:

- Do not defile us (if you have a feeling that what you are doing or about to say is wrong, it probably is!),
- But do reflect what God has implanted on our hearts.

Amen