

Aaron M. G. Zimmerman
St. Stephen's Church (Sewickley, PA)
29-30 August 2009 – 7th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 17)
Series: Hard Sayings of Jesus
Title: "Missing: Your Inner Rachael Ray"
Proper 17: Ps 15, Deut 4.1-9; Eph 6.10-20; Mark 7:1-2, 5-8, 14-15, 21, 23

Mark 7:1-23 Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed... ⁵ And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?" ⁶ And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' ⁸ You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." ... ¹⁴ And he called the people to him again, and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him." ... ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man."

1. Intro

- a. Current sermon series: "Hard sayings of Jesus."
 - i. From a public relations or marketing perspective, this is quite possibly the worst sermon series ever.
 - ii. We always want to have people bring friends, like "Hey come to church." But with this series, it's like "Come to church and hear our new series, 'Jesus Kicks You in the Teeth.'"
- b. It's just not fun. I'd much rather be watching Rachel Ray. (She's a TV cooking show host, like Julia Child but with a lot more Zoloft. No, I mean, she lives in this world of bright color and sunshine and I just want to be in that kitchen... So happy, so peppy.)
- c. But no, this is not Rachel Ray, this is Jesus saying some hard stuff.
 - i. Geoff talked about this last week. We'd much rather have "Jesus Meek and Mild," but instead we get "Jesus Mean and Wild," as Geoff put it, quoting Mark Galli's book of the same name.
 - ii. Jesus doesn't knock quietly, but comes rampaging into your life and starts telling the truth.
 - iii. Which can be very uncomfortable. I mean, who really tells the truth? No one! Denial is a much happier place.

- iv. But ultimately, as we'll see, telling the truth about your life is what finally can open the door to some healing, some grace.

2. Today's Passage and Where We're Going:

- a. In this morning's passage from Mark 7, Jesus directly addresses that great modern, Western Cardinal Rule of Morals (you all know it!): "Be a good person."
 - i. Everyone thinks he or she is a good person. Look at Elaine—or any character—on *Seinfeld*. The most narcissistic bunch ever assembled. But all convinced they're good people.
 - ii. How to go to heaven? "Just try to be a good person"
- b. But in light of this, Jesus says two hard things:
 - i. First, he raises the bar on what it means to be "a good person." God's standards are what matter, not human ones. And we'll talk about what that standard is.
 - ii. Second, after he's raised the bar, and says, "Jump over this," he points out that your legs are broken.
 - iii. But I promise, I'll end on some good news.

3. Main Points:

a. Raising the Bar

- i. Our human standard of "a good person" is so malleable, so flexible, it can mean almost anything. But mostly it's about not hurting other people, not saying mean things, and within those boundaries, doing what you want.
- ii. Being a good person means being one on the outside.
- iii. And the Pharisees, in Jesus' words today, were people that were good at this. They were very good on the outside.
- iv. But God's standard is different. It's total. Doesn't want lip service, but hearts.
 - 1. Jesus' hard saying: You hypocrites, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." "In vain do they worship me."
 - 2. We tend to just look at what we can see—what the passage calls "tradition of men" and "precepts of men"—
 - a. How do we define "Goodness"? Who gets to be a good person? Usually we judge based on externals. The Pharisees did this. We do this:

- i. based on dress, accent, car, appearance of a house.
- ii. Whether someone goes to church or not.
- iii. Religious piety—how people pray. How much scripture people have memorized. “Lord Jesus, we jus’ wanna pray, as your Word says in 2 Corinthians 5...” Like God doesn’t remember what the Bible says!
- iv. Christian home décor. How many Jesus fishes on the back of their car.
- v. Tattoos. Hair. Women’s clothing. “Purity” ring. Christian jewelry or neckties. (I love Jesus neckties, by the way)

3. but God looks at the heart. Jesus sees inside, not just what you do externally. He does not grade on a curve.

- v. **God doesn’t want simply “right behavior,” but rather wants a heart that loves God, and then behavior that comes out of that. So he raises the bar on what it means to be a “good person”**

b. Second hard thing: He’s raised the bar, and then points out that your legs are broken.

- i. He says: ²¹ *For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery,* ²² *coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.* ²³ *All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.* (Note: the similar list in Matthew 15 is much shorter—Matthew apparently thought Mark was too harsh.)
- ii. Sheesh, Jesus! Give us a break. I mean, he leaves nothing out.
- iii. But we see this in our lives. Example: Have you ever surprised yourself with an outburst of anger, or a moment when you gave in to a temptation to which you thought yourself immune? Have you been shocked by a desire to cause physical harm to another person? To someone you love even? Or those emails you write in a blinding rage?
- iv. Personal example: Kennywood. Unbelievably bad customer service in the restaurant. Wanted to put a fork in someone’s eye.

- c. **This is The Human Problem:** The standard of behavior is high. We want to be good and love everyone (or maybe we don’t want to, but we want to want to), and be happy and energetic and get it all done, and get it done right. We want to be Rachael Ray. But

instead, we feel like Cruella De Vil (or Don Draper from *Mad Men*, or George Costanza from *Seinfeld*).

- i. At best, we can maybe act like Rachael Ray for a little while, but then on the inside, we're still Cruella. And maybe on the outside too.

d. That's our problem.

4. Final Word:

a. Sum up—What have we said:

- i. The ethical mandate: Be a good person.
- ii. But that's too lightweight. And we usually get to decide who's "Good" based on our own standards.
- iii. So Jesus has two hard sayings:
 - 1. Being good is not about good behavior but about your heart.
 - 2. And second, your heart is a cesspool of libidinal urges, manipulative self-serving tricks, and base carnal lusts.
- iv. This means if you're going to get right with God, it has to be an inside job. It has to be about what God is going to do in you, not what you do for him.

b. Is there any Good News?

- i. Yes. First, God has come into our world as the man Jesus Christ, lived without sin, and taken your guilt on himself. He is the sacrifice for your sins. We say it every week: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (See John Wayne in John Ford's brilliant film, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*)
- ii. Second, he begins to work in you to change your heart. How does this happen:
 - 1. Shows you the truth about your dark heart. (There is some relief in that.)
 - 2. Moves you to repentance. This is what happens when you're going down a certain path, and something happens and you realize the *status quo* **will kill you** so you turn around.
 - a. The Christian life is a life of continuing repentance. Not the upward climb to victory, but the continued realizing and acknowledging your own weakness, and a deeper trust in God.

3. And then God's Spirit comes in you and begins to work in you. This happens as you spend time hearing the word preached, as you read your Bible, as you pray, as you watch a movie or hear a song, as you hear the Gospel story retold in our remembrance of the Lord's Supper, and as you sleep. His Spirit works in big ways and small ways and ways you might not even see.

5. Conclusion

- a. **Life of repentance, again and again, saying, I can't do this. You take it, Lord.**
- b. **And a righteousness from God, apart from the law, comes. (Rom 3.21)**