

Matthew 15 sermon 3.10.2021 – Heart Problem

PRAY: Give us ears to listen now and hearts ready to obey your Word. Amen

Ross, my father-in-law, loves doing crossword puzzles. Keeps his mind active. He's amazing – still got a good mind at 95. But sometimes he comes to a clue that he and George and I have no idea about. So we google it. We're constantly learning new words. I learnt a new word this week – zinger. Ahh, you immediately thought of KFC right. Yes KFC make zingers, a type of chicken burger. But there's another meaning for zinger. Sometimes they're called one liners. Sometimes we call them put-downs. But as I learnt this week, they're also called zingers.

Zingers - Snappy one liners that make their mark. Winston Churchill was a master at it. Nancy Astor, the first female British MP said to Winston Churchill, "If you were my husband, I would poison your tea." To which Churchill replied, "Madam, if you were my wife, I'd drink it."

Groucho Marx was famous for lines like this one. Leaving a party. 'Well, I've had a wonderful time; only this wasn't it.'

Or this one... 'I never forget a face, but in your case, I'll make an exception.'

Or what about this one: 'From the moment I picked your book up until I laid it down, I was convulsed with laughter. Someday I intend reading it.'

Good one, Groucho.

Now Jesus... was every bit as much the master of the perfect one liner.

That Jesus was Lord of the zinger. Not zingers that were putdowns, but zingers that conveyed truths, deep truths. And here's one in Matthew chapter 15. A sharp sentence which is uncomfortable. It's prickly. It's very direct. And depending on how you look at it, it's either incredibly courageous. Or incredibly rude.

Matthew 15 verse 10. Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth doesn't make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that's what makes him unclean." And the disciples come to him, verse 12, and they say "Do you know that the pharisees were offended when they hear you say this?" Of course they were. That was the point, wasn't it?

Let's back up for a minute and take a look at the situation and you'll maybe see why. Back to the start of the chapter. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law, experts on morality and manners, they've come all the way from Jerusalem, 120km away, a 4 day walk and they've got a complaint for Jesus.

The issue is who and what is clean. And who and what isn't. The question of how to be clean before God. Which, Old Testament books like Leviticus talk about in detail. But the Pharisees and law teachers have got down to a fine art. Especially when it comes to rituals for eating and drinking.

Now don't get me wrong. Hygiene is a wonderful thing. You always want to make sure your kids washed their hands before dinner time. But this was something more. This isn't just cleaning hands before dinner. This is clean before God. This hand washing was a kind of a mini baptism ceremony with jugs of water and your hands before every meal. Ritual hand washing.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law from Jerusalem, they say to Jesus, "why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? (Notice, it's not Leviticus, the commands of God they're breaking. It's a tradition. Of the elders.) Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?"

They don't wash their hands before they eat."

To which Jesus replies in v.3, Who are you guys to talk about breaking human traditions when you're doing the much worse thing of breaking the commands of God. In all kinds of ways. He says, you'll argue your way out of all kinds of things that God says, just to make it more comfortable. And most especially, you miss the heart of it.

See, the question is, where are their hearts on this stuff?

So in v.4 Jesus gives an example, God commanded, Honour your Father and Mother. He wants kids to love their old mum and dad from the heart. And then he adds another command. "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death." Because he wants you to respect them. And to care for them. From the heart. And because for Israel, God wanted them to know he's serious about that and not just mucking around. Israel's meant to be the one land in the whole ancient world where aged parents are loved and cared for. And not just shoved aside and forgotten. And yet what have the Pharisees done? For all their fuss about whether Jesus and his disciples wash their hands, they've mastered the art of loopholes.

And so Jesus says to them in verse 5 and 6 you've got your little ways around this so you say, Mum and Dad, I know you're old and in need, but I've dedicated all my money at the temple and it's for God's service now so I can't help you out... and you just know, don't you, when mum and dad have safely passed away in a few years time you just un-dedicate it from the temple again and use it for your own interests. It all looks very pious and good, very religious, but these people have no intention of really wanting to learn God's commands and obey God's commands.

See what they're doing? Here's the problem. It's there in verse 6. Thus you nullify or cancel out the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites. Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you. (in Isaiah 29:13) Here's what he said: it's there in verse 7.

These people honour me with their lips... but their hearts are far from me.

Do you know anyone like that? Maybe it's you? Lip service. To God. Lip service. To church. Lip service. To caring for people. Big on the rules. Small on the heart. And in the end it's all about you. And what's convenient.

Isaiah says, "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." You Pharisees, half the time you don't even know why you're doing it. You're just in a religious rut. And you're thinking God's somehow impressed. With teachings and traditions that are just rules taught by men. For us this morning we're probably not too concerned about washing every part of ourselves before we come to God. But we

need to ask ourselves Are my actions, the way I'm living each day, are they coming out the Bible, out of the Gospel? Am I thinking I just need to live a good moral life? We need what someone has called a "gospel culture" in our church. A culture where we study God's word seriously, where we are constantly being challenged and refreshed by God's word so we can distinguish between hypocritical traditions and healthy Gospel-centred traditions.

Which brings us back to verse 10. And the zinger. "It's not what goes into your mouth that makes you unclean." As if ritual hand-washing is going to make a difference. The thing that makes you unclean is inside you already. Just ready to come out of you.

It's what you say. It's how you say it. It's obvious every time you open your mouth. "What goes into a man's mouth doesn't make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that's what makes him unclean."

It seems pretty clear what Jesus is saying but Peter comes to him and says in verse 15, "Explain the parable to us." Give it to us in plain language.

And Jesus can't really believe that Peter and the disciples still don't get it. That they haven't figured out yet that the problem with mankind, the problem with all of us, it's the problem of what's inside us.

See, it's exactly right isn't it? And exactly what Jesus is saying. What's wrong with the world isn't something out there. It isn't education, or the system, or the government, or health care, or that you haven't washed your hands this way... it's the problem inside the human heart. Which is the problem Jesus has come to deal with.

All the fuss the Pharisees make about clean and unclean food... all their fuss about the right ritual washings... Jesus says it all ends up going in. And then going out.

But the things that come out of the mouth, on the other hand, verse 18, they're different. The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these... make a person unclean.

What's he talking about? Well here's a list in v.19. For out of the heart come ...evil thoughts. Is that true of you? It's astonishing, isn't it? what you can catch yourself

thinking sometime. Or is it only me? I mean, I wouldn't even dream of telling you some of the stuff that's been through my mind. Then there's murder, adultery, sexual immorality. Theft. False testimony. Slander. All that stuff. Even if you haven't done it, there have been times when you've thought it. When your heart says to you, come on, let's do it. Or your heart says I just can't stand that person. And your mouth, often enough, let's it out.

And Jesus is right isn't he? It's embarrassing, isn't it? those times when your mouth accidentally gives people a glimpse of the real you that you'd rather it hadn't. That overly hasty word. Overly hasty because you didn't quite have time to edit it before it came out.

That argument, you got so steamed up and you said those things, and the problem is, later on you said I didn't really mean it. But the truth is, you did. Right down in your heart, it's exactly what you meant.

And that's the problem, isn't it? Even if you don't want to admit it.

So what can we do about it? See it's easy to wash your hands, isn't it? And it's easy to do rituals and rules. But what about the heart problem? Not so easy.

You know we can be like the Pharisees. Go harder on the external stuff. Go harder on the hand-washing and pretend it's all okay. Go to church more, get more set in our ways, make sure nothing changes. But Jesus has come to go deeper than that. And I hope you're ready to do business. Jesus has already said, right from the start, it all starts with humble repentance. Admitting that our hearts are not right.

And Matthew continues on with the rest of the story of Jesus - he died on the cross; taking on himself all the punishment that our sins deserved. Which means nothing if you're still caught up in pretending. And then you realise the burden's lifted. And you're forgiven. Not by our obedience to a set of rules. But by his obedience from the heart, his righteousness becomes ours.

Peter may not have got it here but later he does understand, he does get it.

And later on he writes two letters as an apostle that we've got at the end of the New Testament. His first letter, he says this, 1 Peter 1:8; 22-23:

For you know it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect... So now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

Pharisees. Empty religion. Empty rules. Empty regulations. Empty. You've been redeemed from that, he says. You haven't purified yourselves that way. We come to Jesus to make us clean. We obey the truth about Jesus. So, Peter says, now it's time for sincere love. Now it's time to love one another. Deeply. From the heart.

Only Jesus can give us a new heart. Let's continue to love each other from the new heart that Jesus has given us.

Now the second story. It's a fascinating conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. A few things to note. Jesus is in Gentile territory. He has moved out of the Jewish area. Maybe to have a break, get that rest that he needs. But maybe, too, there are things that Jesus wants to teach his disciples.

Why does Matthew include this story about a Gentile, and a woman? In his gospel Matthew is constantly asking the question, If Jesus is the Messiah, why does he abandon his own people, the Jews? Well, we've just seen Jesus didn't abandon them – they abandoned and rejected him and ended up putting him on a cross. For the first Christians, many of them coming out of Judaism, it was a reminder that Jesus' priority in his three years of ministry was to the Jews, the people God had called to follow him and be a light to all the nations around. But his intention was for all people from all races and nations to come into his kingdom.

On first reading of this story it seems that Jesus didn't treat this woman in a loving way. It seems out of character with his normal loving acceptance of people.

She calls out to him in v.22 – “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me”. She recognises who Jesus is, even if she might not fully understand what that means. But note in v.23, Jesus doesn’t say anything. Presumably she keeps crying out so the disciples, helpful as ever, say to Jesus, send her away. Now remember this is a Gentile. We’ve just been talking about defilement, what makes you unclean. There were rules of the Pharisees that said you would be defiled if you hung around Gentiles. And another thing, this is a woman. In that society, sadly, women were often less valued than men. So the disciples don’t talk to her, they address their concerns to Jesus. “Send her away, she’s only a Gentile.”

And Jesus seemingly agrees with them

v.24 - Jesus – I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel – that is, not to Gentiles, just to Jews. Is Jesus just going to ignore her?

The woman, has heard Jesus’ reply – her words? “Help me” and now she’s kneeling before Jesus.

Now he’s addressing her. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs” – in other words, I’ve come to preach to and help God’s people the Jews, not to give out to people like you, Gentiles, who are just scavenging dogs.

Oooo! Smack! Good zinger, Jesus. But what’s going on here? Is this the same Jesus who shows compassion? What’s going on?

But the woman has a zinger of her own – “You’re right Lord Jesus, BUT even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Touche! Good one! Give it to him! Notice Jesus’ gracious answer. He says to her, “Woman you have great faith. Your request is granted.” Yes, that’s more like the Jesus we know. So what was going on here?

None of the commentaries that I read said this but I really believe Jesus knew the heart of this woman as she came to him. He knew the faith she had in him. It seems like he's testing her, but I think he was teaching his disciples something here through this woman. The words of Jesus in v.26 about the dogs can be translated puppies, a gentler meaning. Jesus is engaging in a little light-hearted banter with the woman.

Here was a Gentile, a woman Gentile. The teachers of the law would say keep away from this person. But she's going to teach the disciples that Gentiles are welcome in the Kingdom. Like the roman centurion that came to Jesus, and the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus hears them, welcomes them; and in fact Jesus holds up these people as examples of faith, in the case of this woman and the centurion; but also, with the Samaritan woman in John 4, he shares deep truths with her about the Spirit's working in us, he shares this with a woman, a Gentile woman.

What a contrast to the Pharisees and teachers of the law that had come down from Jerusalem to correct Jesus. Their hearts are far from God, here is this woman whose heart is soft towards God. They come with proud hearts to judge and correct Jesus; she comes to him, recognising her need of him, and trusting him as the one who has the power to work in her life. We don't know her name, but I would like to think that we will see her with Jesus, and maybe her daughter who was healed of demons.

I love the way Jesus stretches this woman's faith. For a person with little faith, he might have just healed straight away; but he recognises a depth of trust that would be an encouragement to those he is discipling. And Matthew never forgot that woman; that insignificant woman who gave Jesus that wonderful zinger. Just give me the crumbs that fall down, that's all I ask.

But remember it's not a matter of how much faith we have. Some of us will have more faith than others. But that doesn't matter to Jesus. Remember what Stew said last week, very wise words – It's not how much faith we have but who our faith is in. It's not how much faith we have but who our faith is in. Remember Jesus said if you have faith as big as a mustard seed (a tiny, tiny seed) you can move a mountain. It's not the

amount of faith, but the person we have our faith in can take that faith and move a mountain, do the impossible.

Jesus came to deal with our heart problem. It's he that gives us the faith to believe in him, to trust him.

PRAY: Thank you, Jesus, that you have dealt with our heart problem. Thank you that you died on the cross for us. Help us to be honest with you about our hearts; to come to you to be changed. Help us, like the Gentile woman to come to you with soft hearts, acknowledging our need of you. Only you can change us. Help us this week to walk close to you.