

“Religious or Righteous?”

Date: Sept. 25, 2011

Theme: Integrity; hypocrisy, honesty

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Pentecost 15, Year A

Text: Matthew 21:23-32

Lawyers should never ask a southern grandma a question if they aren't prepared for the answer. In a trial, a southern, small-town prosecuting attorney called his first witness. A Grand-motherly, elderly woman came to the stand. The district attorney approached her and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know me?”

She responded. “Why yes I do, Mr. Williams. I've known you since you were a young boy. And frankly, you've been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat on your wife, and you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you're a big shot, when you haven't the brains to realize you'll never amount to anything more than a two-bit paper-pusher.”

The lawyer was stunned. Not knowing what to do next, he pointed across the room and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know the defense attorney?”

She again replied, “Why, yes, I do. I've known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster too. He's lazy, bigoted, and he has a drinking problem. He can't build a normal relationship with anyone, and his law practice is one of the worst in the entire state. Not to mention, he cheated on his wife with three different women, one them was your wife. Yes, I know him.”

The defense attorney almost died.

The judge then called both counselors to approach the bench, and in a very quiet voice he said, “If either of you two idiots asks her if she knows me, I'll send you both to the electric chair.”

The sermon this morning has to do with integrity, honesty and hypocrisy. A lot of times people say one thing and do another. Jesus was especially critical of that trait when it came to the religious leaders of his time. He told this story about

the two boys as a criticism of the Pharisees, those religious leaders who had dedicated their entire lives to living the Law. They put on great airs about being so religious, but Jesus criticized them for not being righteous.

It was in this context that Jesus told the parable about a father who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." The boy immediately said, "No. But later he changed his mind, and went.

Then the father went to his other son and said the same thing. This one answered, "OK, I'll do it." But he never made it out to the vineyard. Then, Jesus asked a simple question. "Which of the two *did* what his father asked?"

"The first" they answered.

Then Jesus delivered his punch line, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

Wow. That really was a punch line. And the Pharisees were the ones who got punched. I imagine Jesus heard some gasps and "How dare he!" from the crowd that day. It was unthinkable to compare the righteous Pharisees to blatant sinners like prostitutes. Didn't Jesus know that the Pharisees were too good to be lumped together with the likes of them?

But, Jesus says, there's more to being good than simply following rules. It's not that the rules are unimportant, but being good is as much a matter of the heart as it is keeping all the rules. The tax collectors and prostitutes demonstrated they understood that. When John preached repentance, they asked God for forgiveness. They knew they needed God's love and grace. They had a change of heart. God

wants **that!**

Jesus was saying in this little story about the two sons, that its not enough to have good intentions. We have to put our faith into action. The Pharisees were depending on their religious practices to put them into the good graces of God. They were self-righteous. They were full of themselves.

They had heard the prophets, like Micah, who said - “He has shown you, o people, what the Lord require. It is to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.” They had heard the word, but they hadn’t put it into practice.

There is an old Japanese legend, that tells of a man who died and went to heaven. Heaven was beautiful, full of lush gardens and glittering mansions. But then the man came to a room lined with shelves.

On the shelves were stacked piles of human ears. An angel explained to the man, that these ears belonged to all the people on earth who listened each week to the Word of God, but never acted on God’s teachings. Their worship never resulted in action. Therefore, when these people died, only their ears made it to heaven.

Jesus is dealing with a bunch of “earless” religious folk in this passage. And it would be to our benefit to listen-in on this conversation. It is so easy to mistake self-righteous attitudes for sincere faith. And any one of us can be guilty of it. This story packs a powerful message.

How many of us, we who have given our life to Christ and put our trust in His grace, have assumed that now we’ve got eternal life wrapped up, and we can live any way we like. We can ignore the needs of the poor. We can act rudely to others. We can pretend that the starving people in Africa are somebody else’s problem.

We might say, or think something like this: “Me and Jesus are tight. I know the Man upstairs. I got it made. I know where I’m going when I die. I go to church to cover my bases. But I don’t have to think or worry about how I’m living. I’m cool with Jesus.

Yes, we *are* saved by grace and not by works. But being saved by grace does not mean that we can forget God’s righteous call upon our lives. We are still called to be holy, just as God is holy. We are still called to keep the commandments, and the other teachings we find in the Bible. We are not to lust, or to cheat, or to lie or to kill - even with our words.

Getting saved is not just saying the words, “I believe in Jesus.” Getting saved is a life-style. It’s about putting faith into action, on a daily basis. And yes we will continue to fall short. We’ll make mistakes, we’ll sin. But because of the cross of Jesus Christ, our sin has been dealt with. And we can go to God any time and seek forgiveness, and God will wipe the slate clean again.

The apostle Paul says that we should work out our salvation with fear and trembling. By that I think that Paul means we accept God’s grace by faith. But then we spend the rest of our lives living into what that means. God loves us, no matter what we’ve done. But God desires us to keep coming back - to seek His love and grace, especially when we’ve fallen short.

I never want to become so comfortable in my faith that I become like the Pharisees, so certain that I’m saved that I think I can act any way I want. I always want to be in constant vigil, asking God if I’m following His will, certain that the desire to follow His will is in fact pleasing to Him.

So the bottom line is, do you want to be religious, or, do you want to be righteous? I don’t mean self-righteous. I mean transformed by the love and grace of

Jesus Christ kind of righteous. It's not enough to play at our religion. God is looking for transformed lives. Lives that are continually, daily, being surrendered to Him

I don't want just my ear to make it to Heaven. I want all of me to be with Jesus in glory. "God, by your grace, make us righteous, and not just religious. Amen."