

## “Unburdening Our Hearts”

Matthew 23:25-26

(Jesus is more concerned about inward cleanliness than following cleanliness laws.)

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We’re singing and talking a lot about “Clean hearts” today. Before praying, we sang, “Change My Heart O God,” and we’ll close today with “Lord I want to be a Christian in my heart. . .” I don’t think you’re likely to forget, at least for the rest of *this* day, the focus of this worship.

For decades I did not like the phrase “clean heart.” It seemed vague, kind of referring to a rather ethereal spirituality. Actually, the phrase struck me as a little bizarre. Also, it seems somewhat old fashioned. You don’t hear people talk about clean hearts very much these days—except when singing, occasionally, on Sunday mornings.

My discomfort with the term was influenced by an early childhood experience my sister and I had. We were five years old and had just moved to Northern California, where we lived for a year. We had no church affiliation. One Sunday our parents dropped us off at a mainline Christian church (not Methodist) to attend Sunday School. The teacher in that class had the aid of a blackboard; actually it was a green blackboard. She made an outline of a heart with chalk, white chalk. Then she colored in the heart with her chalk so that it was all colored and said that if we stole a cookie before dinner, our heart would turn black—like that one she had just colored in.

But, she told us Jesus would forgive us if we asked him, and our hearts would turn white again. She said this as she erased the white chalk in the middle, to reveal the outlined heart on the green blackboard.

It was sort of an odd demonstration, talking about a “black” heart that was really white and a white heart that was really green. (I had considered hearts sort of red.) But worse was the theology behind her demonstration. It was sort of scary, and stupid. We got in the car when our parents picked us up and told them of the odd teaching, and they never took us back. The teacher’s point did affect me, though. I do occasionally feel a little guilty when I eat cookies at erratic times.

Although throughout most of my life I have not particularly liked the phrase, “a clean heart,” something happened a couple years ago that changed my feeling with regard to this phrase.

I had been working very hard to face, to deal with, to work through a variety of difficult feelings—for months, actually. I recall the experience quite vividly. I was riding my bicycle on a Sunday afternoon, headed up Tustin Ranch Road, which, for me was a tough hill, and I was mulling over my anger, resentment, upset, love, frustration... many emotions... I broke into tears, but this time they were not tears of sadness. They were a different kind of tears—tears of amazing compassion. Somehow I had a glimpse of a big big picture. This glimpse was of a perspective that was bigger than my repetitive thinking and feeling of stuckness. I experienced a flood of compassion—for people, for God, for myself, for life...

When I shared this experience with the counselor whom I was seeing once a month at that time, she reflected, “You had a clean heart.” Hmm.

A clean heart.

Actually, that did describe the experience.

**Unburdened.**

Emptied of yucky feelings/thoughts.

**Shedded.**

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spoke of the time when his “heart was strangely warmed.” He had been agonizing for a long time over his own questions of salvation, and he experienced assurance...blessed assurance.

**A clean heart. A warm heart. An unburdened heart. A heart shedded of weight.** Our Scripture passage today is brief. Some of us know it as much from the musical *Godspell* as from the Gospel of Matthew! Jesus had been talking to a crowd of people, including his disciples, and he used a literary form that was familiar in the Hebrew Bible called the “Woe form.” He had been distinguishing his teaching from the other Jews who were known “scribes” and “Pharisees.” He’s not talking *to* the scribes and Pharisees, but about them. Remember the scribes and Pharisees were two groups of Jews that were actually very religious—but their view of religion was above all to obey laws. Today we might say that the Pharisees were “obsessive/compulsive” about obeying religious laws. The “woe” passage we heard today is one of seven Matthew records right in a row. That is, there is a “row” of “woes” here in this chapter of Matthew.

We could easily look at this teaching of Jesus about the importance of the cleanliness of the inside of the cup, not just the outside of it, and assume that he’s pointing out that we shouldn’t judge by appearances. It doesn’t matter what a person looks like on the outside, whether they have teen-age acne or extremely wind-blown hair as in the old Chicago—the windy city advertisement. **It’s what is on the inside that counts.** While that’s true, and I’m quite sure Jesus would agree, it’s just not the whole point of this passage.

It also is not the case that Jesus is just telling us to be honest, congruent, not to be hypocritical or phony. The scribes and the Pharisees would have agreed to that. Jesus may have been criticizing them for having been hypocritical, but he wouldn’t be making a distinction between his teaching and theirs based on hypocrisy.

**Here’s the deal:** In the Hebrew Bible there are two criteria for ethics: *purity and property*. Jews were *religious* if they behaved according to religious rules—like the Ten Commandments. Do this; do not do that.

Virtually all of these rules are dependent upon the definition of purity and property.<sup>1</sup>

Every culture defines its own “dirt.” For most of us, coffee in a cup is fine, even revered. Some of us don’t like coffee (it’s not our “cup of tea”), but it’s not considered “dirt,” impure. But even coffee-lovers would consider coffee on my dress to be dirt.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of Jesus some people were automatically religiously impure: those who were not Jewish, for example, or those with a disease.

Jesus was saying it’s not *just* obeying all the purity laws, the ritual purity laws of Judaism, which is important.

**It’s not just good to be good.** What is **most important** is to **want good for the other, to love the other, even the enemy.**

Jesus was extraordinarily radical. He commanded people to love, not just to obey laws. But *how can a person be commanded to love?* We can tell children what is right and wrong to do, how to behave, but we can't tell people how to feel. Yet this is exactly what Jesus was doing. We're not just to give backpacks or money to ex-paroles and their children in Redlands, not just to volunteer to help kids at Kingsbury School, Jesus says we are to *love* ex-paroles, their families, and the kids at this nearby elementary school. It may be easy to love these people, but Jesus was saying we need even to love people we consider "enemies." Jesus was extraordinarily radical. His bar was very high.

My experience riding my bike up Tustin Ranch Road, that of having a surge of compassion, pointed toward what I think Jesus might have been recommending—finding amazing compassion, even where there had been big barriers. Can you imagine today warm hearts or clean hearts or surges of compassion between contemporary Israelites and Palestinians, between all Republicans and Democrats and Independents in America?

Jesus wanted a lot for us—to strive to have compassion on the inside, and, oh yes, also to do good on the outside. For Jesus it wasn't either/or—it was both.

Don't just live peacefully, love your enemy. But then, also live peacefully.

Today there are ample reasons for every single one of us to have unclean hearts, burdened souls, weighted minds. We can be railing against other people because of some unfairness or meanness. We can be bitterly disappointed. We can be railing against God for illness—our own or illness of another. We can be angry at nature—powerful as it is. We can be furious at government leaders and church leaders for not making everything all right. And, we can be down on ourselves.

Jesus can tell his disciples—and us—to have a clean heart, to shed the weighty feelings, but it's sure easier said than done. Sometimes it takes a decade to get through the cleaning cycle in the Divine Washing Machine.

But, there must be some things we can do to help us to create conditions that would be ripe for a clean heart. Certainly we can be radically honest with ourselves, keep a diary, and pray for very big empathy. We can speak truth to others and seek help.

Recently a strange experience taught me something about heart cleansing.

I went to a hospital--not in Redlands or Loma Linda--to visit someone. When I inquired at the front desk for the correct room, I was told that the stairs were closed for painting and that the elevator was ridiculously slow. I said, "Okay," thinking that was somewhat excessive concern over an elevator, but I said nothing. I pushed the button of this elevator and waited. Then I noticed something curious. There was a little plastic box affixed to the wall adjacent to the elevator. I looked more closely. A sign read: "To help you wait; please take only one." Inside the plastic container were dozens of tiny animal figures made out of some bendable rubbery substance. I chose a lizard. The sign read: "To help us wait." Hmm. "They," the phantom "they" who were running things had recognized the problem—and the anger of many visitors. So, "they" were giving us something to fiddle with while we waited. The group that gathered to be elevated did laugh. We talked about how slow the elevator was. And, some of us fiddled.

How did those little plastic lizards and crocodiles clean hearts? I think they functioned as preventative medicine. I think that they worked in this way: They indicated that we were understood; we were taken seriously; "they" knew there was a problem and we could easily become angry, resentful, upset . . .

It would be nice if we could have little plastic lizards and crocodiles adjacent to all the things in our lives that burden our hearts, to help us to lighten up precisely because we truly believe that some “They” know that we’re laden down with a burden.

Although that’s not the case, God has been considered at times the “Ear of the Universe.” We can at least know that we are profoundly heard—in all our grief, all our anger, all our resentment, all our discouragement, all our upset--by God. When we feel heard and known, on the inside, we may be able to accept what is and move forward with a bigger picture, and with more compassion in our hearts.

I don’t think our hearts are ever black like a blackboard, green like a green blackboard, or white like chalk. However, our emotional/spiritual hearts can become somewhat “clear,” clear in the sense that they are **unburdened**. Though it may take a very long time and a lot of soul-searching to come up with so much good intent, so much compassion, so much willingness to see a bigger and bigger perspective, Jesus’ recommendation for a clean “inside” surely seems worth our teaming up with God to help it to happen.

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<sup>1</sup> There’s an excellent book, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*, that explains how all the ethics, even sexual ethics, were really based on purity and property. For example, adultery is wrong not because of sexuality, but because a man is stealing another man’s wife; or the wife is not respecting the property rule that she belongs to her husband

<sup>2</sup> “. . . it is of the nature of dirt in any culture that we do not ask what makes it dirty.” It just is Countryman, William. *Dirt, Greed, & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988, 12.