

“Inspecting the House”

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Mark 7:6).

If you’ve ever bought a house, then you know that one of the most important parts of this process is a good inspection. The purpose of a home inspection is to look past the superficial things, like decorations and paint, and find out what’s really going on behind the walls. A good home inspector will examine the foundation and go up into the attic. He or she will search out and scrutinize the heart of the house, digging deep and looking past the façade, even if it means the inspector will have to get dirty doing it. The goal of a good inspector is to uncover the problems that exist under the surface, so that they can be fixed before the sale is completed. And this is exactly what we see Jesus doing in today’s Gospel reading from Mark.

As our text begins, Jesus is approached by the Pharisees and the scribes who, we are told, “had come from Jerusalem” (Mark 7:1). It’s important to understand the part that these two groups played in the religious culture of the day. The Pharisees were a religious party who believed that if the nation of Israel was to obtain God’s favor, then the people needed to strictly observe the Law of Moses and all of the additional rules that had been added to God’s Word over the years by their “elders.” For them, this was a matter of national security and their job was to make sure that everybody was towing the line. The role of the scribes in the Jewish religious world was to serve as the experts on the Law. These men were the copyists and keepers of Scripture, making sure that every last letter of the Torah remained intact and unchanged. If the Pharisees were the FBI, then these scribes were their legal team. Together, these groups represented the power and authority of the Jewish church, and when they showed up on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, more than 100 miles from Jerusalem, there was no doubt about their intentions. They were there to investigate and interrogate this teacher from Nazareth who had gained such a cult following, and, in verse five, they begin with an accusation against Jesus’ disciples: “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

This question was an attempt to lure Jesus into a debate over the Law so they could then use His remarks to indict him of blasphemy. It was clearly a trap. But, instead of taking the bait, Jesus goes on the attack essentially telling them: “You are the hypocrites Isaiah wrote about.” This was not the response they had expected, and calling the religious authorities “hypocrites” was no way to garner their respect. It’s the only time we find this word in Mark’s Gospel and its use was a scathing comment on how Jesus saw the scribes and Pharisees. This term refers to “someone who wears a mask to hide the truth” and using the word “hypocrite” was the equivalent of calling these church officials liars, and then, to back up his claim, Jesus referred to the words of Isaiah from today’s Old Testament reading: “As it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men” (Mark 7:6-8).

In these words, Jesus completely turned the tables on the scribes and Pharisees, and, like a good home inspector, Jesus stripped away the façade and exposed the truth about who these men really were. You see, the Pharisees and scribes were focused purely on external behavior. They were concerned and consumed with keeping the rules, without any regard for the hearts of God’s people, and, as if His rebuke from Isaiah wasn’t enough, Jesus kept charging, pointing out how these religious leaders had twisted the tradition of the elders by claiming that the money in their personal bank accounts was dedicated to God so that they could get out of providing for the needs of their own parents. They had used God’s Law to manipulate, control and elevate their own interests... and we do the same thing.

We also twist Scripture to prove our personal points, we add to and subtract from God's Law so that it supports our own agendas, and we misinterpret God's Word so that it becomes a way for us to justify our own sinful behavior and get ahead of others. The purpose of the Law of God is to show us our *own* sin, not to help us point out the sins of others, and yet, this isn't how we are wired, and this isn't how the world works. Can you imagine if one of the would-be Presidential nominees we've been hearing so much about lately would stand up at a campaign event and confess all of the ways they had failed and fallen? It would be political suicide. And, the truth is, we don't want to do it either.

There is always a temptation from our sinful nature to hide from the truth and simply turn our faith into a moralistic checklist, to view God's Word as nothing more than a manual for good living, giving ourselves some measure of control. And when we do this – and *we all* do this – we turn away from the Lord and we put our faith in our own ability and behavior, rather than in the forgiveness that Christ earned for us and that we so desperately need. We are all guilty of getting it wrong, of missing the point of God's Word and placing more importance on the works of *our* hands than on the pierced hands of Jesus.

The truth we are taught in today's Gospel reading is that no matter how together we may appear on the surface, and no matter how well we may keep the commandments, we are all beggars before the Lord with nothing to offer and we stand before God with broken hearts and empty hands. This is the truth Jesus reveals in today's reading and once we realize this truth; once we understand that no matter how good our house looks on the outside, or how well we wash before dinner, we stand before our Creator with sin-sick hearts, helpless to change...and we are at the mercy of God. And, my friends, with God's mercy everything changes.

This is why Jesus came. He came for the sick. He came for the poor. He came for us beggars to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, and, in His life, and death, and resurrection, our sins have been dealt with; they have been punished; they have been removed; God no longer sees them as ours and the rules to which we had so desperately clung have been ripped from our hands and they have been replaced instead with the promises of God. Open your bulletin and look again at the last verse of our reading from Isaiah. Here God promises, "In that day the deaf shall hear...and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord; (and) the poor...shall exult in the Holy One of Israel."

God's Word doesn't exist to help us cover up our sins with good works and holy living. Its purpose is to expose our sins and to break our hearts, so that we can be built into a new house; one that is not based on keeping the Law, but on Christ who kept the Law for us. This is what the author of Hebrews meant when he wrote: "Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself...Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope" (Hebrews 3:3-6).

I opened this sermon by talking about the job of a home inspector to search out and scrutinize the heart of a house, digging deep and looking past the façade, even if it means the inspector will have to get dirty doing it. This is exactly what Jesus does for us. He has gotten dirty for us. He has taken our sin on Himself. He has restored us completely, and, as Paul writes, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (II Corinthians 5:17). Through the Law, God has revealed our sin and pruned our hands from our self-righteousness, and now, in Christ, our empty hands can receive the gifts of His grace and we can share them – one beggar to another – and, together, we can exult in the Holy One of Israel! Amen.

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