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February 11, 2020

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“Evils that come from within are what defile” (Mark 7:23).

*1 Kgs 10:1-10; Mark 7:14-23*

Jesus explains to his disciples the lesson of yesterday’s debate with the scribes and Pharisees about what is clean and unclean. It is not purifying cups and vessels or ritual hand washing that keeps us from being contaminated but keeping our hearts pure of evil thoughts and intentions. The obsession with external cleanliness or avoiding certain foods may protect us physically, but what about our spiritual

health?

Jesus graphically compares digestive intake to moral output. Food goes through the body and out as waste. But immorality originates in the heart in the form of evil desires and designs, and when these are expressed in word and action, that is what defiles a person. Jesus' criticism of the scribes and Pharisees is that, while they cultivate their appearance and ritual lives, they are in fact hypocrites, actors wearing masks that hide their true intentions.

Jesus will ramp up his criticism of the religious leaders of his time when their hypocrisy hides murderous intentions and self-serving strategies to protect their own status and control. They are like whitewashed tombstones that hide dead men's bones. They are teachers who attract disciples only to corrupt their minds and prevent them from knowing the truth. They are like trees that produce bad fruit instead of the good fruit their roles as guides intended.

The practice of a regular examination of conscience has long been a part of a healthy spiritual life. It is how we get beneath our behaviors to look at root causes for the dissonance and disconnect between the person we want to be and the person we are when no one is watching. Unresolved anger, unchecked desires we indulge as harmless but which cloud our perceptions of others, self-righteousness that prompts us to judge others, old hurts and old scores we can't let go of, faults we project onto others but ignore in ourselves, the sins no one wants to admit but that reprise the messy side of human nature never challenged and seldom corrected - all of these issues wait for our decision to surrender to our need for conversion only grace can accomplish in us.

Jesus warned his disciples to beware of the "yeast of the scribes and Pharisees," the invisible culture that slowly invades and transforms a person into a self-righteous zealot, lacking compassion or insight into their own weaknesses, lording it over others for their own good, separate from and superior to ordinary people. The leaven he proposed instead was the Holy Spirit of love and truth. And he assures us that God will give this Spirit to anyone who asks for it.

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