

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, September 3, 2006

Sermon Text: Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

My first church you've heard me mention from time to time. It was a baptism by fire. My first church was in Hardeeville, and I learned so much there! I say that in the same way people say they learned so much from their first marriage. When I arrived, I continued in worship what I thought was their tradition – standing for the reading of the Gospel, and at the appropriate point in the service, I said, “Please stand for the reading of the Gospel.” Well, about half of the congregants stood and the other half stayed absolutely stuck in their pews. The half that was seated was making noises and rustling their bulletins and glancing up sideways and angrily at those who stood. I was perplexed. You see, I left seminary with this dream in my mind. I had this beautiful dream that the body of Christ would be unified, would be united. I'm sure that some of our retired pastors out there are smiling because they also had the same dream, and then they got their first church, and they grew from innocent to initiate. I was shocked! Later, I asked an older and wiser member, “Is your tradition to stand during the reading of the Gospel or not?” The older man said, “No, it is not our tradition to stand during the reading of the Gospel.” I said, “Then your tradition is to sit during the reading of the Gospel.” Again the man answered, “No. It is not our tradition to sit during the reading of the Gospel.” I was perplexed. I said, “But the congregation is half and half over this. They're fighting over this! They're staring daggers over this! They're rustling bulletins over this! They're either calling names or not talking at all over this!” The old man interrupted me, and said, “Yes, that, that is our tradition.” Hardeeville!

Jesus said, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites as it 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 precepts of men. You leave the Commandments of God, and hold tight to the traditions of men.” Then Jesus says something very interesting. He says over in Verse 14, he says essentially listen up. When you see in the Bible, “hear me all of you and understand,” that means listen up. There is nothing outside of a man, which by going into him, can defile him, but the things which come out of a man are what defile him, out of his heart, out of his essence, out of his being.

That reminds me in a physical sense of my old friend, growing up in Woodruff, David Schmidt. Growing up, Dave was my best friend, and my son is named after him. One day, I saw Dave drop a piece of bologna on the kitchen floor, and he picked it up, and he gobbled it up, and he smiled, and said, “Three second rule!” Dave didn't believe in the germ theory of disease. Dave took in a lot of questionable bologna over the years. What came out of him is what matters to God. That's what God cares about!

Nothing outside of man, says Jesus, by going into him can defile him, but the things which come out of a man, or out of a woman, that's what defiles us. That's what reveals what is in our heart. Now, what does this text say about God? I think it says that God is not satisfied with external religious doings. You know, we love to diminish religious faith down to bow this way, pray this way, worship this way, sing this way, that's right, you've got it, that's what God had in mind, and now I can judge you if you do it any

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other way! Yes, we love to make rules. He or she who makes the rules also makes himself or herself judge.

Jesus was not so concerned about outside ritual behavior. God wants our hearts, our souls, our minds, our selves. God wants it all, inside and out, not just memorize a verse and pray like this and sing like this and be on your merry way. God wants a changed inside that produces a changed outside, not just perfect rules and rituals.

In the Bible, we find constantly a thorn in Jesus' side. The chief nitpickers who worked against God in Christ were the Pharisees. We get the Pharisees confused with the priests. The Pharisees were not really the priests. The Pharisees were the lawyers. They didn't really concern themselves about the soul of faith. They concerned themselves with the trivia, the minutiae, not the heart of the law, but the letter of the law. Jesus was looking for changed hearts, who did what really mattered. Jesus looked for people who cared and did because they had God's spirit informing their conscience, but the Pharisees, they were looking for washed hands and clean cuticles and perfectly combed hair. You see? What do we look for? What do we look for?

Even today we judge people when they use the wrong words or grammar, or we look askance at people if they vote in a way of which we don't approve or if they drove the wrong car or if they dress the wrong way we consider inappropriate or out of style.

I read a story last week about an extreme example of this. I could hardly believe it. A young girl it seems, some of you must have seen this or heard this, went to a new school, and some other girls asked her what kind of music she liked. She said that she liked heavy metal music. It might not be your cup of tea, but she said, "I like heavy metal music." She named a particular band. Well, because she answered that way, these other girls, now these were girls, attacked her physically, and one stabbed her in the eye with a pair of scissors because she liked the wrong kind of music.

Externals and the way we judge. God looks at the heart, but we judge so harshly on everything else! I've also read that in Iraq today, Muslims of the Shiite sect and of the Sunni sect of Islam have taken to changing the ring tones on their phones if they are in one area or another because if your phone rings, and it plays a traditional Sunni song, and you're in a Shiite area, you may be beaten or killed. Depending on where they are, they change their ring tones. Personally, I put mine on vibrate.

Externals matter so much to us, but not to God. I'm reminded of the times that Jesus violated all the big rules like healing on the Sabbath. He did that several times. Once, He healed a woman who was bent over with back problems for 18 years on the Sabbath. At first, the crowd was amazed. They said, "What can this mean? He must be from God!" Then others said, "No, no, no, no, no! It's not a good thing! It's a bad thing! He cannot be from God because He did a miracle on the Sabbath! No!"

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We limit what God can do if it doesn't conform to our list of proprieties. I've met some squeaky clean, outstanding church goers, and no, I will not name names or churches, but some who later revealed themselves to be trembling bundles of hatred and contempt and judgment against anyone or anything, which did not conform to their view of reality. Sad! They were always, always quite certain that God was on their side, or that they were doing God's will even when they stared you down or put you down or made visitors feel bad for wearing plain clothes to worship or having different views or different backgrounds. Squeaky-clean lip service to God! Out of their hearts came judgment and spite.

God does not need our help enforcing rules in His church. When Jesus said whomsoever will come, that is exactly what He meant.

Another time in Hardeeville. You may wonder, Jim, if somebody from Hardeeville were in the congregation, would you tone down your stories? No! Because they know it's true. Another time in Hardeeville, a group of people spat venom at me for the very idea that black people might come to a program I was planning. One left a meeting after tossing a hymnal and slamming a door. She said, “My grandmamma did not build this church for black folks to come here!” I said without thinking, I was moving anyway, I said, “No your grandmamma did not build this church. God did, and His son said whomsoever will come.”

The Gospel today is about nitpickers drawing lines to keep people out. They did not wash their hands properly and ritually, and so they were condemned. Jesus pointed out that the Pharisees, if you read the between section that we did not read, He pointed out that they had devised a system called poor ban. The strict letter of the law way of technically devoting their money to God while their parents were alive so that they could not spend money on their parents, and apparently they found another tricky technical way of using the money for themselves after their parents died. Read that part we left out in Chapter 7. Can you imagine someone so cold-hearted that they would tie up their money in a way to gain praise from the church, and at the same time, withhold it from their own parents until they died. Then, they undevoted the money so they could live it up while pretending to grieve over the early death of their neglected parents. Can you believe such functional atheists using God to save money, and at the same time, look good in front of others? External religion is what Jesus was speaking about! External ritual purity against the reality of the internal change of the heart and the mind and the soul, which God wants for us in Jesus Christ.

You know, another example that's right here in this church, if you walk up that wooden ramp coming into the church, just right outside the sanctuary, you look up that huge brick wall, it looks absolutely solid. I think it is three or four bricks thick. Is that right? Rudy, do you know? It's pretty thick. It looks beautiful and strong, but I've got some pictures here of the rotted wood on the inside of that wall that shows that the internal reality is not as strong as it appears from the outside. As soon as we meet the budget and pay for the new building, that's the next priority.

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People, externals do not tell the whole story! Folks can be poor and have good hearts before God. People can be uneducated and be Godly and faithful to the core. People can be dressed to the nines, and lie every time they open their mouths. People can have multiple college degrees, and have hatred and pettiness and jealousy running and ruining their lives. We are called to become something more. We are called to new birth. We are not just a sort of a club for God that pays the bills and does the same old things over and over generationally until we die, and then our children take our place. No! Spiritual growth is what we are here for, not a spiritual stalemate where we come this far to God and no further. Clean hands and not a changed heart. Growth and change is God’s call, inside and out.

To put it very simply, if we ain’t growing spiritually, we ain’t following Jesus Christ. If we are completely satisfied with who we are, then we do not yet know who we are! I believe that. If we are completely satisfied with whom we are before God, then we have not yet seen ourselves as God sees us. If these statements strike you as wrong, then they are for you. Anyone satisfied in their faith is in danger just as the Pharisees were in danger of reducing faith down to a tiny little list of trivia. God is not impressed with respectability! We work for respectability. We yearn for respectability. It opens doors for us when we have it. Respectability – God doesn’t care about it. God is no respecter of persons. God looks at the heart. Your take-home assignment is to take yourselves less seriously. What you own and what you know and what you’ve done and what you would never do is all secondary to God. Think instead what God knows about the internal workings of your heart, your mind, your soul, the internal workings of your priorities and your choices. Have you kept the vows and promises to your wife that you have made? Have you kept the vows and promises to your husband that you have made? To your God that you have made? To your church that you have made? To your employer? To your country? Is there integrity between your heart, mind, soul and your behavior out there in the world?

I want us all to pray, pray to the God who knows us through and through, inside and out. Let us pray. Lord, look at us. Look at our souls, and show us our souls as You see us. Show us where we need to grow. Show us where we need to go from where we are, and Lord, help us never be satisfied with looking good. Help us become good and Godly and more and more Yours, more like Jesus by the power of Your Holy Spirit, create in us new hearts, new life, abundant life, and the joy and the peace that you promised. These will come when we surrender completely to You. In Jesus name, amen.