

August 30, 2009
 Luke 11:33-41 / I Peter 3:1-5a
 It's What's On the Inside That Counts

I probably could have (and maybe should have) entitled this sermon: "The Essence of True Religion," or "Keys to a Healthy Spiritual Life," because that's what Jesus begins to do here!

Starting in these verses, and going clear through to the end of chapter 12, Jesus confronts and challenges various misconceptions or the distortions of true biblical or Gospel spirituality that were prevalent in His day. And the things He says to them are pertinent and relevant to us, because even today, we still find the same distortions or misconceptions.

Solomon was right when he stated in Ecclesiastes: "***There is nothing new under the sun.***" We may have seen a lot of technological advances since Jesus day, but human nature has remained essentially unchanged! And thus we also can tend to fall prey to the same exact misconceptions and distortions in our day, that they did in theirs.

And what I'd like to do this morning is simply cover the first two things that Jesus addresses in these verses: The need to be careful about what we allow ourselves to dwell upon and take in, and the need (as my parents used to say) to "focus on the majors instead of the minors." The things that really matter, as opposed to the things that matter very little.

Yet having said that I must begin by saying from the outset that William Barclay is right when he says: "***This is a passage the meaning of which is not easy to grasp.***"

And Kent Hughes tells us why. The first picture, he says (about a lamp needing to be put where it can "give light to all who are in the room") is easy to understand. "***But the second similitude,***" he says, "***is more difficult, because it represents the eye as 'the lamp of the body,' and our eyes, generally speaking, do not generate light.***"

In addition to that, in the first similitude He speaks of the lamp as radiating light outward so that it can give people the ability to see in a dark place. Which makes us think of the lamp shining out to give light to others.

Thus, when He says in verse 34 that the "***eye is the lamp of the body,***" our first inclination is to think He means that we have a light within us that radiates out from within our body through our eyes to others.

That would be a person's first inclination as to how to interpret this passage. But that's not the direction He takes us in, because before we are able to go in that direction, He reverses the imagery and speaks about light coming into the body through the lamp of our eyes, rather than shining out from within our bodies through the lamp of our eyes.

That's why Barclay and others can say: "This is a passage the meaning of which is not easy to grasp." It seems a bit confusing to most in our day, because we're more accustomed to hearing people speak of the "eye" as a "window" — "a window to the soul," through which light can flood in. And, because we don't tend to speak in those terms it makes the meaning of the passage somewhat harder for us to grasp.

So what's the answer? Context!

Jesus has just finished speaking of the need for people to listen to His words and obey them. / And in the verses immediately preceding these verses He's just finished telling them that they need to listen to Him when He calls them to repent, because in Him they have one speaking to them who is "*greater than Solomon*" (v. 31).

Much of Solomon's wisdom was derived from observation, experience and God-imparted common sense. But Christ, on the other hand, was Himself "*the wisdom of God*," as Paul pointed out in I Cor. 1:30-31.

And likewise, He had just said, just as the Ninevites had repented when Jonah preached to them, the people in His day needed to be doubly ready to heed His call to repent, for in Him, "*One greater than Jonah*" was calling them to turn from their sins.

And it's in the context of those statements that He speaks of a lamp giving off light. Which means that in verse 33, the lamp doesn't refer to light which is to be given off by US, but to light which emanates from JESUS and is to be taken in by US!

It's when we mistakenly equate the "light" with something given off by US (as many have) that we completely miss Jesus message to us in this text. It's not "This little light of mine...", but "This little light of His..."

Which brings us to Jesus FIRST point in this passage. That He Himself and His preaching about the Kingdom of God, is the "light" shining forth from the "lamp" which was not meant to be placed "under a bowl."

It is His person, and His teaching and His wisdom that constitutes the “light” that is meant to be put on a stand so that all who enter the house will be able to see. This passage is ***NOT*** speaking about us ***radiating*** light, but us ***receiving*** the light that radiates from Him! And only when we see it in that way, do the things which appeared as problems dissolve away, and the verses flow together with a consistent and uninterrupted flow.

And knowing that also helps us to understand that when He says, ***“the eye is the lamp of the body,”*** He means that it’s the spiritual organ of perception that lets the light of Jesus shine into us, light a prism, or that bright light that Dr. Paul shines into our eyes at his eye clinic when he gives us an eye exam (a light so bright that it hurts)! Because as I said before, Jesus uses the word “lamp” in the same way we tend to use the word “window.” He speaks of it as something that lets light into a dark room.

Which is exactly what Jesus goes on to say in the rest of the passage: ***“When your eyes (which are the lamp of your own body) are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you.”***

And he means, ***“illuminating every part on the outside of you just as my truth needs to illuminate every part on the inside of you.”***

Then **SECONDLY**, having clarified that, we can now look at the first key to a healthy spiritual life: The need to take in the light of Jesus and His teaching about the Kingdom, and let it permeate every part of our being, so that ***“our whole body,”*** as Jesus says, can be ***“full of light.”*** That’s the goal. To have good eyes! Not eye’s that generate light, but eyes that allow the light of Jesus (who is the light of the world) to pass through and flood every part of who we are!

And here we need to note that for Jesus, Man, or people in general, are not by nature full of light. Jesus is not a humanist! For Him the inner state of people is darkness, and their desperate need is to receive the light that He came to bring.

It’s dark by nature, because of sin and idolatry, which drove the illuminating presence of God from it, and thus desperately needs, once again, to be illuminated! ***“For Jesus,”*** says **Darrell Bock** ***“there is no automatic inner light. Light must be received.”*** Our souls remain in darkness until the divine light of Jesus penetrates into them through the eyes (“the organ of our spiritual perception”) making us, “full of light.”

I can't stress that enough! You will NEVER have a Christian understanding of humanity (or share Jesus view of humanity) until you understand that any source of light within any human being is light imparted by God's grace in renewing and enlightening the soul through His words, His wisdom, and the presence of His Holy Spirit. It's not something they were born with, or something that natively resides within them.

Thus Jesus admonition to us is twofold:

1st) If we want to be spiritually healthy, we must be sure that our eye, which is the "lamp" that lets in the light of Jesus into our body, is good. Or literally, in the Greek, we must be sure our eye is "simple, single or unmixed."

What does Jesus mean? "Single" and "unmixed" most likely means "single-minded" or "unmixed" in what we focus our attention upon. Or in other words, what we allow to pass into the soul should not be "mixed." We should not turn our eyes away from the light of Jesus and His teaching and look at that which is dark, or evil, or sinful, or unholy. We must habitually be turned toward the direction of the light source, so that that light can continually flood, unmixed with darkness, into our being!

That's Jesus point. Too many people (His listeners that day and many today included) dabble in all sorts of contradictory things. They will allow their eyes to take in both light and darkness / good and evil / pure and impure / holy and unholy things.

And I'm not talking about things that catch us off guard in a fallen world. There are dark, evil, impure, unholy and immoral things that come across our path uninvited. In a fallen world we are frequently victims of random assaults by the darkness.

Just the other day, I was walking down the aisle in the Grocery Store (a seemingly "safe" place) when two young men (who appeared to be in their mid-20's) walked by discussing things and using language that should never be uttered at all, never mind in public. It was like a dark cloud walked by!

I'm not talking about things like that. I'm talking about things we pursue. Things we do have control over not things we don't have any control over. Things we seek out, and entertain, and solicit, and go after, and invite into our lives or willfully dabble in that are dark, thus having eyes that are "mixed" rather than "single" and "unmixed."

You see, what Jesus tells us is that we were not simply pawns. That we do, to a great degree, have control over the amount of light or darkness that enters our being. That's implied in verse 34b, where we are exhorted to have eyes that are "good," "unmixed," or "singular in their focus."

Which means that if I want to be full of light, I sometimes need to turn the channel on the TV, or turn my head as I walk down the street, or click the "cancel out" button on the computer screen, or put the book down, or change my mind about the place I'm going, or the reason I'm going there.

There's much truth to the quaint little child's song that says, "*Be careful little eyes what you see.*" Because what Jesus does in these verses is call us NOT to turn to the light on some occasions and turn in the direction of the darkness on others, but to always seek (so much as we are able — and by His Spirit we are able) to be singularly focused on the Light source — On Him and His teachings and the Good News of the Kingdom.

Not walking with one foot in the kingdom and one in the world, or trying to walk the thin line between the holy and the unholy, but walking away from the darkness and straight toward the light.

I've read stories in which people claim to have died and find themselves standing in some ethereal place and seeing a brilliant source of light in front of them that they take to be Jesus. And they're mesmerized by it and walk toward that light source. That's what Jesus, in this passage, is calling us to do — walk in this life with our eyes singularly focused on Him — the Light of the World who "*came down into darkness!*"

Which brings us to Jesus 2nd) admonition: "*See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness.*" It's so easy for us to think we are turned to the light, and taking in light through the lamp of our eyes, when in reality the source is really darkness masquerading as light. "*Satan,*" we are told in II Cor. 11:14, "*often masquerades as an angel of light.*" In fact, that's what the name "Lucifer" means, "Light Bearer."

And Jesus call to "*see to it that the light within us is not darkness,*" is a call to exercise caution and spiritual discernment in regard to things we think are good, and think are pure, and think are sources of light and spiritual nourishment, when they are really sources of darkness that are simply disguised as light. (The teachings of the Pharisees and experts in the law on this particular occasion.)

Wicca, a form of witchcraft which is one of the fastest growing religions among women in America, is often put forth as “a source of enlightenment.” Years ago a friend from Florida sent me a booklet called “Universal Light.” Open the cover and there is a wonderful picture of Jesus. One portion says this (as God speaking through the pastor): *“My Son has said, ‘Of myself I can do nothing.’ He was speaking of the Light of the world, even as He said, ‘I AM the light of the world.’”* (So far so good. Sounds like a Christian book!)

The he goes on, *“He was saying this light could do nothing apart from the Universal Light of the Father Mother God... As you recognize this Light as being the Father Mother God, you will begin to receive this increased Light through the sunlight (s-u-n-light)... It is the Light of the Father Mother God that gives its light to the sunlight.”*

Later on another parishioner speaks and says of the pastor, *“You, _____, are a highly evolved spirit, who is an Ascended Master, through which Jehovah, which is the name of the God of our solar system — the Sun God or Trinity. You would express mystical aspects of Jehovah God through some human channel... (Our Ascended Master’s) teachings come from beings who have (raised) their consciousness above the astral and mental levels into the world of the Christ Spirit.”*

What is it? Gnostic, Essence, New Age, alchemist, and spiritist thought mixed with very selective pieces of the teachings of Jesus. It is Light mixed with darkness!

“Be sure,” says Jesus, *“that the light within you (the light you allow yourself to take in) is not darkness.”*

Then **LAST**, Jesus corrects one of the most enduring misconceptions or distortions of true biblical spirituality that there is — the ever-present tendency in religious circles to focus on the outward rather than the inward / to try to look clean on the outside rather than be clean on the inside / The never-ending lure in religious circles to focus more on external ceremonies or clothing or cleanliness than the condition of one’s heart.

This, I’m convinced, is a temptation that will never die! As many times as Christ told us it’s what’s on the inside that matters, and not the outside... / As many times as He’s assured us it’s the condition of our heart, rather than our clothes, or our hygiene, or the meticulous performance of ceremonial rituals that matters most, it seems that every generation falls prey to it in one way or another — all over again!

Why? Because like the Pharisees, people are always looking for tangible, outward, visible ways to measure “righteousness” and therefore make us feel we are more pleasing to God than the others who don’t do as we do.

That’s what Pharisaism is – the desire and attempt to be righteous before God on the basis of our own merits, rather than the merits of Jesus. It is to be self-righteous (right with God on the basis of what we do) rather than on the basis of what Christ did for us in His life, death, resurrection, ascension and present intercession for us.

Those are the two basic ways of seeking to be right with God — through our own efforts, or through the efforts of Jesus given to us as a gift to be received by grace, through faith.

And as we see over and over and over again, there is nothing Jesus has a greater distaste for than Pharisaism. No group of people receives as much rebuke from Jesus in the Gospels, as the Pharisees. And what we find today is the first of many examples to follow where Jesus will say to the Pharisees (or their counterparts “the experts in the law”) “Woe unto you.”

Why does He say it in this particular case? Because He went to eat at the home of a Pharisee, and because He did not do the traditional ceremonial washing before he ate, the man was apparently “surprised.”

But it obviously wasn’t just “surprise.” As one commentator points out, it was a “condescending type of surprise.” The kind where Jesus would have noticed a “holier than thou” frown of condemnation. An “I can’t believe He claims to be a man of God, and He’s not washing His hands before He eats,” type look.

And what is Jesus response? ***“You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people!”*** (Not exactly following the advice of Andrew Carnegie in his best-selling book: “How to Win Friends and Influence People!”)

Yet it is a warning we need to take to heart. The Pharisees demanded that one wash their hands before eating, even though it was not commanded in the Bible. And as Jesus points out, they expanded it to include the washing of the plates and glasses, lest a fly had landed on the plate and made it unclean. A practice again demanded by the Pharisees but not specifically commanded in Scripture.

That's what "**legalism**" is — making as a requirement for godliness, something that the Bible itself doesn't make as a requirement for godliness!

So, as Jesus points out, what does Scripture focus on? The state of one's heart. Jesus is not opposed to physical cleanliness. He would have no problem with parents requiring their children to wash their hands before they eat!

No. What He opposed was the Pharisees obsessive concern for external cleanliness, while they expressed little concern for inner cleanliness — this particular man's quickness to judge Jesus for failing to wash His hands being a perfect example.

Here's a man whose hands are sanitized and dishes are spotless (lest he have a germ on one of his fingers, or eat off a plate that a fly may have landed on)! Yet his heart is dark, judgmental, and as with most Pharisees, "**full of greed and wickedness.**"

That's what the Pharisees were known for: Their greed and love for power, social prestige and money (which Paul would later call "**the root of all kinds of evil.**")

So what does Jesus do? He not only tells him that it's what's on the inside that counts the most, but encourages him to give away what's on the inside "**to the poor**" (a phrase that does not occur in the original Greek text).

What does it say? Literally it says: "**But rather, give what is inside you as alms and you will find everything clean for you.**" Or as Darrell Bock puts it, "**Give away your greed and wickedness, get rid of your sin, and everything will be clean for you — the outside as well as the inside.**"

That's Jesus word to us: Don't be overly concerned with outward rituals and religious cleansings. That's not what matters most! It's not being physically clean, but spiritually cleansed!

What we need, if we are to be spiritually healthy, is not an obsessive concern that **bacteria** might get into our **body**, but a healthy determination not to allow **sin** to continue unchallenged in our **soul!**