

“Characteristics of the Unbelieving Mind“

John 7:14-24

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Text Comment

- v.14 Apparently the Lord felt that showing up late would prevent the kind of outpouring of popular enthusiasm that would precipitate his death before its appointed time. We know what happened six months later when he approached Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover feast.
- v.15 That is, how could one have such a grasp of the Scriptures and their meaning without having studied at one of the great rabbinical schools.
- v.16 One of the features of the teaching of the rabbis was that they paid great attention to the rabbinical sources of their teaching, often giving long citations from previous rabbis. That is, by the way, one of the things that so distinguished Jesus teaching and made it so bracing and new and powerful to the people. He would say, “But I say to you...” while the scribe would be giving a lengthy list of citations to prove that what he was saying had been said by various rabbis before him. Tradition was everything, invention was suspect. But, here, Jesus says that his teaching, also, is not his own invention. The Father in heaven gave it to him to give to them.
- v.17 A most important point. There is a moral dimension to finding and knowing the truth. Those who have faith in God and seek to be submissive to his will will discover the truth and they only. Modern philosophers call this “presuppositionalism.” One cannot assess the truth, as it were, from the outside, from some position of neutral objectivity. One can know and find the truth only from the inside, that is, by putting faith in God and submitting oneself to his will. Then things become clear and sure.
- v.18 Jesus is neither a religious charlatan nor a theological teacher. His motives are pure and unmingled. He is not simply trying to persuade others of his views. If that were the case he might use any means to that end, but he has clearly rejected that kind of pragmatism (as we read last week, vv. 3ff.). He is here to do his Father’s will in his Father’s way.
- v.19 The Lord has said that those who will find the truth are those who do God’s will. And where is that will to be found? In the Law of Moses. But, these people do not keep that law and so do not do God’s will. That is why they do not see the truth. The particular disobedience that proves his point is the desire to murder him on the part of the religious authorities.
- v.20 No one is trying to kill him, he’s paranoid. That counter charge rings a bit hollow in light of v. 13. Jesus now sidesteps their reply and reminds them of the controversy that erupted the last time he was in Jerusalem.
- v.22 The Lord knows his Bible!

- v.23 You see the Lord's point. According to their view of Sabbath keeping, they were breaking the Sabbath to circumcise on the Sabbath day, but they regularly did it in order to keep the law that required circumcision to be performed on the eighth day after birth. But if circumcision may be done on the Sabbath why not healing? If something may be done to part of a man on the Sabbath that seems to be work – viz. circumcision – how much more something that heals the entire man. Indeed, as the Lord will elsewhere argue, caring for the true needs of one's neighbor is and always was a true obligation and a true keeping of the Sabbath day.
- v.24 Their approach to God's law was superficial and missed its real point and burden, a claim often made, as you remember, by the OT prophets. They strain out a gnat and swallow a camel, as the Lord said on another occasion.

We spoke last Lord's Day of the pride that kept men from coming to Christ. He accused them of being evil, and they hated him and rejected him for it, as we read in the previous paragraph. Now we have a more detailed account of the workings of the unbelieving mind in the presence of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As the Puritans would have put it, now pride is being broken up small that we can see it in its parts. In the Synoptic Gospels, of course, we get a lot more of this than we do in the Gospel of John. The Lord exposes the motives and inner workings of the unsaved mind over and over again in immortal passages in the Sermon on the Mount, in some of the great parables, in conversation with individuals and the crowds, and, most dramatically, in the terrible woes pronounced on the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. But, in the Gospel of John there is not as much of this. But we have it here in the verses we have read and in this dialogue that the Lord has with people who have seen his miracles but who will not believe in him or follow him. Why? What are they thinking that prevents them from seeing Christ for who he is and for embracing him as their Lord and Savior? I am, this morning, preaching to people who are mostly Christians on a text that records statements the Lord Jesus made to a crowd of mostly unbelievers. But the anatomy of sin is a subject as important to Christians as non-Christians. To be wise, honest, perceptive in the evaluation of one's own life and one's own attitudes is as crucial to going on in the Christian life as it is to beginning it in the first place. And surely there are some here who have **never** faced the truth about themselves!

So what did Jesus say about these folk, these ordinary, everyday people, these people just like people today?

In the first place, he said they were guilty of a vast overestimation of their own goodness. This is a form of that pride we considered last Lord's Day morning as the bottom sin, the original sin of the human heart. People think of themselves, as Paul will later put it, much more highly than they ought to think.

The Lord makes that point in v. 19 when he accuses them of being breakers of the Law, a charge to which they take immediate umbrage. And so he did often during the three years of his public ministry and so they always responded: not with a *mea culpa* but always with an angry and defensive self-justification. The Lord told them that they were sinners through and through and they angrily protested that they were not. He said they broke the Law of Moses and they said they didn't. Christ began his preaching with the message, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand," but only a few of them could think of what they might repent of.

And that is the problem today. People think much better of themselves than they should, they judge themselves much more generously than they judge others typically, and they judge others much more generously than they should in many respects.

I've given you some of these figures before, but they seem so perfectly revealing of the character of human self-judgment and self-evaluation. In a survey taken a few years ago, a survey of nearly one-million high school seniors [those who had taken the SAT], it was found that:

- a. 70% rated their leadership ability above average and only 2% below.
- b. As to getting along with others, zero, I said *zero* per cent, rated themselves below average and 25% rated themselves in the top 1%.

In another study:

- a. 90% of business managers rated their performance as "superior."
- b. 86% of employees rated their performance "better than average."
- c. Among divorced couples, 90% insist that the breakup was the other spouse's fault.

Like the rich young man whom Jesus loved, if pressed they would certainly admit that they were not perfect, and people who knew them well could force them to admit certain weaknesses or to remember certain blunders committed in the past, but, by and large, they think highly of themselves as to their character and goodness. It is a superficial judgment to be sure, but it is the judgment they make.

It is interesting, for example, that here in Tacoma, in the orgy of hand-wringing and recrimination that has followed the arrest of the juveniles who went on a beating spree this summer and finally murdered one of their victims, the one thing that has not been much mooted or discussed is the darkness and evil that resides in the human heart, the penchant for human beings to be bad and to do bad things, and the desperate need for those evil tendencies to be checked, tamed, and controlled. The kids were bored, we are being told. But we are not being told why relieving boredom should have such ugly and sinister consequences. What makes cruelty and violence anyone's means of relieving boredom? Why would anyone enjoy *that*? Nor has there been, so far as I have seen or heard, any prominent figure in the story confessing "there, but for the grace of God go I. I would have done such things given the right circumstances, given the upbringing and the social context that has shaped these boys. My heart is as dark as that."

Until people give up the fundamentally dishonest view they have of themselves, this judging by appearances, this superficial judgment, as the Lord called it, they will never break through to the truth about God and man and salvation. They need a Savior desperately because they are such inveterate sinners and have so much to answer for to God.

In the second place, the Lord said that people severely underestimate their alienation from, even their hatred of God. It was offensive for Jesus to suggest, as he did in v. 19, that they were trying to kill him, even though it was obvious to the crowds that the religious leadership positively hated Jesus of Nazareth. How dare he suggest such a ridiculous thing. But, of course, some of these same people will have been among those demanding the Lord's execution just six months later.

People generally think that they are friendly with God, even if, they might admit, they aren't particularly devout or even religious. They certainly have no hatred of God and the idea that they would have conspired with those who murdered the Prince of Life is outrageous to them.

Thomas Carlyle, the Victorian man of letters, suggested that "If Jesus Christ were to come today, people would not even crucify him; they would ask him to dinner and hear what he had to say and make fun of it." But Carlyle was a sentimentalist as so many Victorians. He had little appreciation of how much more violent, how much more vicious unbelief becomes when thrust into the presence of perfect goodness and when confronted by that goodness. So long as people are left to themselves they can indulge the illusion that they are friendly toward God. When God appears to them and confronts them, it is another matter altogether! We see men and women living as they do in a world largely indifferent to God and his Law and his Judgment. They are bad enough seen in *that* light. But God sees what those same polite men and women would become and what they would do if directly faced with God and his demand that they submit themselves to him, love and follow him, and confess him their Lord and Maker. It would be Golgotha again on a still greater and more horrific scale.

I say, look into the hearts of those boys in Hilltop. They are just children. They have been poorly raised, of course, and our hearts weep for what they never received as children. They had the worst of examples set for them. They suffered the corrosive effects of bad company and, no doubt, the American entertainment industry consumed in huge quantities throughout their brief lives. But, still, they found delight, brotherhood, thrill, satisfaction, fulfillment, a sense of purpose, a sense of power, in being cruel to other human beings, finally even in snuffing out the life of a man who lay unconscious at their feet. We speak of such crimes as being "senseless," but they weren't senseless to those boys at the time.

Tell me that those hearts – like any other young people placed in the same set of circumstances – I say, tell me that those hearts are friendly to God or would welcome God's coming among them as the Judge of All Men, would eagerly admit and happily confess that they were powerless under the hand of the Almighty. Oh no, they would run and they would fight – pathetic as their resistance would be – just like everyone else who does not believe in Christ, however polite, however upstanding, however religious. What you see in these boys is just what is in everyone else. It is painted in bolder strokes in the inner city, but it is the same. Our Savior said it was. The Pharisees committed murder all the time, they just did it in their hearts because they were sophisticated enough to realize that it would be better for them to hate than to kill. Inner city kids aren't as able to make that fine distinction!

And, said the Lord, what you are toward your neighbor, whom you can see, you are, by and large, toward God, whom you cannot see.

In the third place, the Lord said that people hide themselves from themselves by hypocrisy, by a stress on the outward, the appearance, that is, on the wrong things. The Lord is quite aware that even wicked people can be morally zealous. Zeal in moral judgment is pandemic in human affairs, it is a reflection of the moral nature of human beings as God has made them. These people were nothing if they were not moral zealots. They scorned Christ's judgment of them as untrue and unfair. How dare he say that we are trying to kill him, that we do not keep the Law of Moses! Here is a case of right and wrong and Jesus is wrong. Here is a case of moral offense and we are right to be offended. And in the matter of Sabbath keeping, it is a difficult question that he poses and not easy to answer. For that reason he should not be so harsh with

those who disagree with him. A little tolerance, a modicum of appreciation of the theological difficulties here would be in order.

And so it always was. The prophets dealt with the same problem in their day. They accused the people of immorality, but the people replied that, to the contrary, they were very moral and they had the evidence to prove it. They went to church, they offered sacrifices, they gave to the temple, they said their prayers, and so on.

And so the Lord bored in, he was always boring in. No you can be very religious and still be immoral. You can be forever talking about right and wrong and be deeply wicked. Indeed, you can make a career of moral crusading and completely fail to do the will of God. Men will think in moral terms. That is their nature. But only those who love God and his will are actually good men!

And so today. Christians who proclaim the law of God and salvation by Christ alone are condemned as narrow, bigoted, and judgmental. It is one moral judgment against another. Hugh Hefner condemns the democratic party as narrow minded and judgmental for canceling a fundraiser that was to be held at his Playboy mansion. And now, in all the papers, we read of municipalities and large corporations that are cutting their funding of the Boy Scouts because they discriminate against homosexuals. People who take a very casual view of pornography or tax evasion or divorce or promiscuous sex or the mockery of God and religion, can be fiercely zealous in their condemnation of sexism, racism, and air pollution (especially when caused by cigarette smoke).

And what is that but the kind of “over-righteousness” that the Bible everywhere condemns. These people, morally outraged as they are, have simply completely missed the point. They concern themselves with discrimination to the nth degree, but utterly fail to respect God’s law regarding sexual purity. They tithe their mint, dill, and cumin, when it comes to having respect for all men, but utterly fail to do justice to the truth that was revealed to man in Jesus Christ.

You know the famous adage of Francois de La Rochefoucauld, the 17th century French moralist [*Maxims*]: “Hypocrisy is an homage that vice pays to virtue.” Well so it was then and is now. People will pass judgment all the time, the more judgment the better. It is to them the proof of their morality. But, all the while they will trample on the will of God and so fail to achieve true goodness. They will end up as men do being hypocrites through and through: parading virtue and hiding or denying their vice. “To do its worst, evil must look its best.” [C. Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 98]. And rarely did evil look better than in the devout, upstanding lives of the moral crusaders who put to the death the Prince of Glory. Blood lust paraded itself as love for God. Jealousy and envy as righteous indignation. Just as today. The father who is cruel to his children is only concerned to raise them right. The gossip is only speaking the truth in love. The spendthrift is only taking advantage of a great deal and being a good steward of his money. And on and on it goes in every conceivable aspect of life. Lust becomes love, greed becomes healthy ambition, pride becomes self-esteem, the refusal to sacrifice for others becomes the assertion of one’s rights and liberties, and indifference to questions of truth and right becomes tolerance and public-spiritedness.

Oh, no. We have a reason for our behavior, a justification for it, at least an excuse for it. Anything, anything at all to prevent us from having to say that we are guilty, that we have been

and are evil, that we deserve God's judgment, and that we are long past escaping that judgment by anything that we can say or do.

In a famous case, particularly well-known to Northwesterners, a prominent US senator was accused in 1992 of sexual harassment by sixteen different women who had worked for him. The senator's response was so revealing of the true state of human hearts. First he denied the charges outright. Then he attacked the credibility of his accusers. Precisely the first two steps the Jews took here: denial and then the charge that Jesus was demon-possessed. Next, when it became clear that he could not evade his guilt, the senator issued an apology. Faced with charges that he had been doing this for years, kissing and groping female staff members, he declared that he never intended "to make anyone feel uncomfortable." What is more, he told the media, he intended to seek professional counseling to determine if his behavior had been the result of his use of alcohol. [Plantinga, 101-102]

As one Christian observer wrote, "Here is an apology of major, almost metaphysical, elusiveness. According to the senator, nothing happened, but in any case he meant no harm by it, and, regardless, he might have been loaded at the time and so missed the significance of the nonevent in question. ..." [Plantinga, 102]

Well, we Christians say, "what is new about that?" People have always been that way and I am that way far too much and far too often. But, we also say, I know this is the truth about me: that I grotesquely overestimate my goodness, I underestimate the measure of my rebellion against God, and I hide it all behind a veneer of morality and zeal for what is right.

Christianity is all about men coming to know God. In the science of theology the doctrine of God or of Holy Scripture comes first. But in religion, in human experience, in actual fact men come to see God and salvation in terms of themselves. The first doctrine is the doctrine of oneself. So long as one has a false view of himself or herself there can be no getting started knowing God or obtaining his salvation. **To put it another way**, no one is going to say, in the words of Frederick Faber's wonderful hymn:

Father of Jesus, love's reward,
What rapture it will be
Prostrate before thy throne to lie
And gaze, and gaze, on thee!

Who has not from the heart first said,

No earthly father loves like thee;
No mother, e'er so mild,
Bears and forbears as thou has done
With me, thy sinful child.

To know ourselves this way is the first part of our recovery to life and fellowship with God. Jesus came preaching repentance for the kingdom of God is near. And now we know we have more to repent of than we ourselves will ever even be able to discover. Which is why we need a Savior, a Savior whose salvation is so complete and so perfectly suited to our need – who can make monumental sinners right with a holy God and who can turn even our hypocrisy into honesty before God and man.

It is what we need, he is who we need, for nothing is more certain than that those self-adoring and hypocritical rebels against the Son of God are *who we are* apart from the grace of God!