

*“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and as a pretense you make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut up the Kingdom of Heaven against men; for you don’t enter in yourselves, neither do you allow those who are entering in to enter. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel around by sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of Gehenna§ as yourselves. “Woe to you, you blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifies the gold? ‘Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obligated?’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifies the gift? He therefore who swears by the altar, swears by it, and by everything on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it, and by him who has been living in it. He who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God, and by him who sits on it. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. But you ought to have done these, and not to have left the other undone. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat, and swallow a camel! “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and unrighteousness. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the platter, that its outside may become clean also. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitened tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and decorate the tombs of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we wouldn’t have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’ Therefore you testify to yourselves that you are children of those who killed the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you offspring of vipers, how will you escape the judgment of Gehenna?”*

I grew up in some pretty wild country and it was normal to see all kinds of animals out in the woods. Once, I was walking along—minding my own business—and I saw a mountain lion up on a rock, looking right at me with yellow eyes—in a way that seemed like trouble, and it was trouble.

Suddenly my encounter turned into one of those times when everything goes in slow motion.

I saw his muscles tense and his claws extend in preparation to jump. As he began his leap, he snarled and I could see that the yellow of his teeth matched his evil eyes. I had no weapon and though I wanted to look for a stick or rock, I was frozen in place.

I couldn’t move or even yell as he hit the ground at the base of the rock and then bunched again. Time seemed to slow even more and I could see his every feature as his second arch brought him within ten feet of me. I was still frozen as he jumped one last time, flying toward me with his mouth open and a vicious snarl on his lips. I could smell death and rotten meat as his front legs hit me in the chest. I looked right past the yellow teeth and into his mouth and way back into his dark throat.

All of a sudden I realized what it was like to be the prey instead of the hunter. I understood what it was to be below something else on the food chain. The mouse instead of the cat. Bugs Bunny instead of Elmer Fudd. The Roadrunner instead of Wile E. Coyote.

(Extended pause)

That reminds me of how much I love to watch those old Warner Brothers cartoons. Funny, though, the one I like best doesn't seem to come on any more. It is about a fox who puts on a dog suit and calls himself George and lives in the doghouse with the dogs and...

(Pause)

Oh, yeah, I was telling a story—where was I? OK, I was looking right down the throat of a hungry mountain lion, but you'll be happy to know that he didn't kill me.

(Pause)

See, I had a sudden inspiration and I jammed my arm right down his throat all the way up to my shoulder. Those evil yellow eyes were right here (show) but they were beginning to show panic. We stared into each other's eyes for what seemed like forever, but I guess it was really only a fraction of a second.

(Pause)

What did I do? Reaching just as far inside him as I could, I grabbed him by the tail and pulled for all I was worth. I pulled him inside out—facing the other way—and he ran all the way to the county line before he knew what happened. He sure did look different and pretty helpless with all his inside parts on the outside. He didn't look much like a cougar.

Well, maybe it didn't happen exactly like that ;c)

When Jesus began his ministry, most of his troubles came from the religious leaders of the day. Their problem was that he literally turned the religious world inside out. Not only that, he turned the religious leaders inside out. Jesus didn't care what image they were projecting—he wanted to know what was on the inside of them. He wanted to know what their intent was. For Jesus, the intent was more important than the letter of the law. He was not interested in appearance, but in the spirit. He was interested in the internal instead of the external.

Do you remember what Jesus said about adultery and murder? Here is a loose paraphrase—If we lust after someone, we have committed adultery and if we hate someone, we have committed murder. You see, Jesus knew that lust is the root-cause of sexual sin and that hate is the foundation of murder. Our bodies act out of the condition of our heart and spirit. It is our heart Jesus cares the most about.

That is made clear by the passage we read for today in the ways Jesus described the Pharisees. Most of us are familiar with the Pharisees. They were important religious leaders who were so concerned with external details that they even tithed their herbs.

Jesus was not against that at all—but he told them [and us] that there is more to religion that what can be seen on the outside. In a real sense, Jesus wants to turn us inside out so that he can see that which is really important.

In verse 24, he mentions their straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel. As an aside, let me encourage you to see the humor in Jesus' teachings—in the way he dealt with the pompous and the proud. I'm of the opinion that we have treated Jesus as stoic and dry and stern for far too long. We are not paying enough attention to Jesus' ability to poke holes in those who were too self-important.

What a mental picture it is to strain at a gnat and swallow a camel—if you take it literally. His point works in a literal interpretation doesn't it? They worried about the unimportant and didn't even see the important.

As I was studying for this sermon, I also read that the Pharisees strained their wine and their water so that they would not accidentally swallow a “creeping thing” or a bug—which was forbidden by their dietary laws. They were such literalists that they believed accidentally swallowing a bug could bring condemnation from God. After all, it was breaking the law of God.

Remembering that a camel was also unclean and not approved for food—picture the picture of the religiously pious coughing up a tiny gnat and swallowing a camel right down. You can bet that everyone except the Pharisees laughed. Common folk knew that the Pharisees had no moral qualms about taking advantage of poor widows and orphans—or as Jesus called it, “devouring their houses.”

Again, it is not the external image which God sees—it is the inside. We cannot fool him, because he is constantly turning our actions and our being inside out—looking at the lining.

[Turn jacket inside out.]

The manufacturer of this coat put a lot more effort in the outside shell than they did in the lining. See, they left some loose threads and wrinkles and spare buttons. Also, the fabric is nothing to shout about, is it?

This is how God sees us. He knows our intent. He knows our heart.

In verses 25 and 26 we see more humor. You know that coffee cup you forgot to empty at work on Friday? How would you like to go and fill it the rest of the way up first thing Monday morning without washing out the mold? Jesus said that the Pharisees were like that cup, spiritually. They were SO careful to look clean to everyone else—and yet they were full of sludge and dirt and mold.

Funny picture—except to those who took themselves so seriously. They were mad enough to kill!

You know, I've always been disgusted with those Pharisees. Working on an image instead of real righteousness. Trying to look well-dressed spiritually while their lining was filthy. Following the letter of the law and destroying the principle. BUT—as I've gotten older and as I have taken an honest look at myself and at church and at modern Christianity, I've come to see that we are WAY too much like them.

We make an appearance at church with no intent to listen to God. We sing the songs without hearing the words. We try to look pious and right while our prayer-lives are non-existent. We use religious language and yet we are full of racial prejudices and hatred for those who are different from us.

I don't know about you, but when I look at the lining of my spiritual body—when I look at the mirror God holds up, it breaks my heart. I don't want to be Pharisaic, but it is so easy to fall in that trap. Fortunately, in this passage, Jesus tells us what God wants to see in our lining—he calls them the weightier matters of the law.

Justice, mercy, and faith.

Here are three things God cares about. You've actually heard me talk about these before, but hey, if GOD thinks they are the most important things, then maybe we need to talk about them over and over again!

I want to spend just a couple of minutes on each one and encourage us to remember that these are more important than religiosity. These are more important than any image we project.

Justice or judgment can be the administration of justice in the courts system or executing proper and right laws and statutes or protecting the injured and oppressed or doing what is right and equitable. This is NOT using a loophole in a law to cheat someone. The Pharisees used the law to take away the homes of the poor, the oppressed, those who had no recourse—such as widows. It was legal, but not just.

Anytime you and I use the letter to break the spirit—we are guilty. Not only that, but I believe that if we know it is happening and we fail to confront it for the sake of others, we are guilty. Jesus says that if we want to be truly righteous we will be just personally and work to see that there is proper justice around us.

Mercy includes all acts of compassion. We are to be actively compassionate. We are to meet the needs of others. Jesus says that we are to be internally compassionate—and act on it. In Jesus' parable of the man who fell among thieves, the religious leaders failed to be merciful.

For the sake of ritual cleanliness or convenience or even for the sake of religious duty, they passed by one who needed mercy. It was the Samaritan whose lining contained mercy. He spent his time and his money and his effort for the sake of one who hated him, in the social sense.

By saying that mercy is a weightier portion of the law, Jesus is commanding you and me to

focus on the needs of the needy and showing kindnesses to the downtrodden. Even if they don't deserve it and even if it gets our religious shell a bit dirty.

The third weighty portion Jesus points out is faith. This can mean keeping your word and your promises and as such it would be connected to justice or judgment. BUT, in Luke's Gospel, we see that he substitutes "the love of God" so I understand this to mean our internal religion—our lining—our relationship to God.

As Christians, we are to trust God and to believe in his benevolent power. You and I should be doing what we can and leaving the rest to God, having faith and trusting God to be a God of love, mercy, healing, and grace. It is God who changes hearts and lives—from the inside out. We are to trust his word and do his commands—even more, we are to trust and worship his being.

Jesus says that the internal things, the more important things are justice, mercy, and faith. Just as James did and as Peter did in the passages for the last couple of weeks—Jesus is showing us that we are supposed to let our religiousness, our way of appearing, spring from these INTERNAL things, from our connection to The True Vine.

It is time now for a hymn of trust, faith, and commitment. If you haven't yet today, I'll encourage you to take off your spiritual coats and look at the lining—to grab your natural being by the tail and turn it inside out—looking at what God sees. When you've done that, respond as the Spirit leads—privately or publicly.