

## *Uniting Heart and Hands*

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Ancient Witness: Matthew 23:25-34

Wow. Can this really be Jesus? In this 23rd chapter of the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus offers a blistering, scathing critique of some of the religious enforcers of his time. In this section of the New Testament, this section is the Seven Woes to the scribes and Pharisees.

It's startling and seems out of character of the calm, loving Rabbi we know as Jesus. Maybe this is why that this section isn't in the lectionary (the official schedule of readings) and is rarely preached about in churches today. His anger jumps off the page. He doesn't hold back. He spits fire.

He calls them "blind fools" and "blind guides," pretending to be able to show people the spiritual path but who cannot even see the path for themselves. Jesus says, "Woe to you" or "Damn you," according to one translation. Over and over he calls them "hypocrites" or "impostors." They hold others to a standard that they fail to hold themselves. They are "play actors," liars, phonies, fakers, charlatans. They try to appear perfect by tearing others down. They puff themselves up and exalt themselves with self-importance. They are driven by their ego and are oblivious that this is going on. Jesus says that "they do all their deeds in order to be seen by others."

Jesus calls them out and says that they are full of greed and self-indulgence. And in so doing, they persecute and pursue and kill and crucify the true prophets and sages among us, and they shed the blood of the righteous. They are violent and ruthless in their causes, hurting and trampling upon others. He called them "children of hell."

Jesus challenges their spiritual arrogance, as they try to impose their will on others. They delude themselves into thinking they are perfect as they sit in judgement of others. They twist the words of the scriptures to fit their own agenda, missing the whole point, which is loving God and loving others. Jesus said that they focus on the minutiae and totally miss the most important stuff such as justice and mercy and faith.

Jesus is incensed that these so-called religious leaders don't mind at all that so many people—God's precious children—are not being loved or treated with justice and mercy, in the name of God. They said that they loved their neighbors, that they loved God, but Jesus knew better. They loved being in power—calling the shots and being in charge—and they conspired to get rid of Jesus—to kill him—because he threatened their power, forming an unholy alliance with an oppressive political system.

Jesus called them a brood of vipers, a bunch of snakes, savage wolves pretending to be sheep.

Of course we have modern-day Pharisees. Those spiritually arrogant who seek to impose their will on everyone else. I think I saw some at the abortion rights rally yesterday here in Pullman, willfully making no distinction between a fertilized egg and a nine-month-old fetus. Life is life, they say. Taking a painfully complicated issue and turning it into a simple cartoon. Saying they speak for God. Based on judgment and fear. All others who disagree with them are complicit in murder and therefore belong in jail or worse. Such certainty might make them feel pure, but it is at the expense of others. And they seem oblivious to the pain and agony that an unwanted child would bring to so many women and to the children themselves, consigning many of those to a life in poverty. Where is the justice and mercy and love for them?

Jesus, it seems to me, would see through those who use the label of “pro-life” for where are these people when it comes to life outside the womb? This block of voters are against paid parental leave, that all other developed nations have and that would actually make the birth of a child possible without casting the family into poverty. These anti-choice politicians are against minimum wage, putting the lives of infants at risk as they live in poverty. They are against the child tax credit that was responsible for lifting countless families and children out of poverty. They are against federal funding for schools and education, against Aid for Dependent Children, against expanding healthcare, against universal daycare. After children are born, they seem to be anti-life. They vote for politicians who give tax breaks for billionaires and corporations instead of helping families and children. If they were indeed pro-life, how could they support the insane levels of military spending and a war economy, siphoning off the national treasury, instead of helping people live? How could they be satisfied with the paltry efforts of our nation to address famine, epidemics, gun violence and poverty? How can they say nothing about White Supremacy that has been responsible for so much senseless violence and death, such as the young White Supremacist who gunned down and killed 10 Black people in Buffalo yesterday? And how can one be for life and say or do nothing about climate change, which threatens organized human life itself? No, Jesus would see how this issue is being cynically used by politicians simply to acquire power and votes with a slogan.

Jesus saw what was in the hearts of the Pharisees and scribes he faced. And he saw that it was more about the lust for power and to be seen as pure, and less about love and true concern for others. He kept talking about their hearts, what is on the *inside*. For him the motives matter! Even if an action seemed virtuous on the outside, it would decay and rot from within. He said that they are like “whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but *inside* they are full of bones and filth.” He told them that on the outside they look so righteous to others, but on the *inside* they are full of hypocrisy. If we say that we are Christian, that we are following Jesus, then the condition of our interior, of our hearts, *matters*. Otherwise, it is simply performative.

Jesus said, “Look, you say that if you lived in the previous generation, you would have supported the prophets then and so you now put flowers on their graves.” Perhaps you are for having a national holiday in their honor. “But when it comes to the present-day prophets, you hunt them down and destroy them.” And you are all for gutting the Voting Rights Act. Because prophets get at the heart of the matter; they address more than the symptoms or the surface of a problem. And how one deals with a prophet reveals their true motives and intentions.

And so motives matter, especially for those who proclaim that they are part of a spiritual community. What is in our heart matters. What is inside matters. Jesus said to them, “You clean the outside of the cup, but inside it is filled with greed and self-indulgence. Clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.” It needs to start on the inside.

This is why a church cannot be simply an ethical society, a do-gooding organization. We need to be also concerned about the *inside*. As T. S. Eliot wrote,

*The last temptation is the greatest treason  
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.*

Jesus’ warnings to the Pharisees are for us all, really.

Earlier in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “Blessed are the *pure in heart*, for they shall see God.” (Mt 5:8) And this is why we are here, to pursue a pure heart. And make no mistake, this is not a one time thing. It is a continue, constant process. And even then, our hearts are never totally pure if we’re honest. But we’re concerned not just with acting righteously and justly; we’re concerned about what’s inside. We make our prayer like the writer of the Psalms: “Create in me a *pure heart*, O God.”

We resist perfectionism and the easy certitude, because it’s fake. We honor humility and vulnerability, because it’s honest. As Augustine said, “Never fight evil as though it were something that arose totally outside yourself.”

So how do we get a pure heart? First, by realizing that it is not something we can achieve for ourselves. It is not through will-power. It is not through self-determination or self-help or self-anything. Rather it is through surrender. It is realizing that it is *God* who creates the pure heart. It is by letting go of our agendas and our desire to be seen as good.

I was at a conference in Albuquerque, NM over 10 years ago, at which the spiritual teacher and writer, James Finley said,

*The mystic is not somebody who says, “Look what I’ve experienced. Look what I’ve achieved.” The mystic is the one who says, “Look what love has done to me.”*

And at the conference, Richard Rohr followed this up by saying,

*It seems to me Christianity has put major emphasis on us loving God. Yet the mystics consistently describe an overwhelming experience of how God loves us! In their writings, God is the initiator, God is the doer...*

*[Mystics] invariably find ways to give that love back through various forms of service and worship, but it’s never about earning the love—it’s always about returning the love. Can you feel the difference? Returning God’s love is almost a different language. It’s not based in fear, but in ecstasy.*

And so it all starts there. As a spiritual community, it's not about earning love or admiration. It's not about proving oneself to be worthy. It's not about scoring points. It's about being transformed from the inside out. It's about allowing ourselves to be loved by the Holy Mystery that we call God. It's about allowing God to create pure hearts within us.

Thanks be to Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.