

The argument that Jesus has with the Pharisees is eerily similar to the arguments that I have with viewers of Fox News. Jesus disparages the authority of their sources, and they don't recognize his authority. It truly is confusing, for someone who doesn't have a dog in this particular fight.

Briefly, there is in addition to the written Law, which Moses received from God at Sinai, an "oral Torah," the communal regulations that tell you specifically how to follow the written Law. It's the oral Torah that specifies handwashing and the washing of goods from the market, and the washing of cups, pots and bronze kettles. The Pharisees challenge Jesus for not observing those practices, and he responds with a quote from the prophet Isaiah about how people make pious noises but substitute their own rules for God's commands. So he's dissing the oral Torah.

Jesus goes on to point out that some mandates conflict with each other. For instance, you should make offerings to God, but you should also support your elderly parents. So if you only have enough money for the offering, and tell your parents "I can't do anything for you," you "make void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on."

There are two problems with this argument. One is that Jesus himself had earlier showed disrespect for his mother, when he was told that his mother and siblings were asking for him, and he said, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" If he wants to criticize the Pharisees for putting God ahead of their parents, he's living in a glass house. Second, the oral Torah *recognizes* this problem of conflicting mandates, and says that you should definitely put your elderly parents ahead of making offerings at the Temple. So it's kind of a straw man argument; the conflict has already been resolved.

And maybe this is why the disciples are confused and have to ask him about his teachings when they're alone with him. I have to say that his answer makes a little more sense this time. Now he focuses on our inner and outer selves. Things that go into you or happen to you can't defile you. If you're assaulted or abused or you literally eat something foul, that does not make you unworthy or polluted. It's a thing that came from outside you; you didn't generate it or cause it. The things that come out of us, from our hearts, are what defile us: wickedness, deceit, envy, greed, and so on. Those are the qualities we need to pay attention to in ourselves, and deal with somehow so that we don't spew defilement out into the world.

If you think about it, though, what Jesus refers to as "whatever goes into a person" is food, and he's referring specifically to kosher food laws. He's saying that if you eat a pork chop, in contravention of kosher laws, you're not defiled. Fine, but Pharisees saw kosher and other laws as spiritual disciplines, practices that helped them to be internally transformed. When you pay attention to all your mundane doings, like cooking and eating and dressing, and you try to do them in a way that brings God to your mind, then (the notion is) in being more aware of God you'll be internally transformed. Confucius had a similar idea: behave like a gentleman, even if you're not feeling it, and that habitual high standard of behavior will shape your character and make you a better person. I think the Pharisees' critique of Jesus and his disciples would be that they're not trying. They're not going through the motions that will eventually make them better people.

This story, then, opens up a really interesting question: to what extent *does* our behavior affect our interior condition, and to what extent does behavior come unmoored from our interior condition? The Puritans criticized the Church of England for fancy vestments and

memorized prayers, charging that people took comfort in the trappings of piety without actually being pious. But the C of E folks would say that those “trappings” created an environment of reverence and awe that would enhance the deepening of piety. Any practice can become detached from its purpose and be seen as an end in itself, but surely that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t cultivate practices intended to shape our souls.

I know I’m wandering from the pericope, but I do think these questions flow from it, and they’re hard. If I’m a faithful Pharisee and conscientiously wash my hands before every meal, but am not yet completely transformed in my inmost self, won’t my handwashing look like hypocrisy to the neighbor who saw me yelling at my husband yesterday? Don’t the practices we adopt in hopes of growing look like pretentiousness to those who see how flawed we still are? And if so, what kind of witness is that to the God we proclaim? You see that play out in complaints that people feel they don’t really fit at church because everybody is so smiley and cheerful, and they feel they can’t be themselves. But that “everybody” is trying to be smiley and cheerful in order to tap into their own resilience and not to scare other people off. There’s such a chasm sometimes between our aspirations and our realities, and no way to tell which is which in another person.

I think the best way of living with that chasm between aspiration and reality came from a colleague of mine who shared this story with me. She had had several stressful weeks, not only at church but in her family, and she was short on sleep and a little bit sick. Not a morning person, she had dragged herself to a 7 AM Bible study that some men at church run and like her to be at, and at that meeting she learned that one of the participants had casually and

thoughtlessly undermined a delicate operation she was conducting at church. She blew up at him. I don't remember who walked out, but I think one of them did.

So. My colleague's defenses *were* down, but she behaved unprofessionally and unpastorally toward a parishioner because she still has wickedness, pride, maybe murder, God knows what else in her heart, despite her best efforts to corral them. And here's what she did: she apologized to him privately, and then she apologized to the group. She said that she wished she had managed herself better. And then she just let the church member be mad at her, and let people feel the way they felt, without trying to justify herself.

I appreciate what she did, and I hold it up to you, because I think she managed the chasm between aspiration and reality with integrity. She aspires to treat everyone with gentleness and dignity, and she practices it, but when she fell short of her aspirations she owned up to it. Don't get me wrong, she felt upset not only about her own failure but about the thing her church member had done, and she probably lost more sleep fretting about it, but given that we are fallen human beings, we need to expect some failures. In fact it strikes me that the most pernicious thing about the vices that Jesus cites—avarice, wickedness, slander, and so on—is that they are most powerful when we refuse to acknowledge them. The shame of being flawed can be so strong that we won't admit it, and we create excuses and work-arounds for ourselves that prevent us actually addressing the flaws.

A few weeks ago the Des Moines Planning and Zoning Board heard comments from people on the northeast side of town who opposed bringing a shelter for homeless women and children into their neighborhood. People talked about lower property values and overcrowding at the elementary school and strangers wandering around at night. It's not happening in my

neighborhood, so it's easy for me to talk, but those sound like fear disguised as prudence or common sense. A woman whose yard backs up to a similar shelter in the Fairgrounds neighborhood told the *Des Moines Register*, "I see no problems. They're wonderful people. I can't imagine what another neighborhood would complain about." (DM Register 2/5/20)

Maybe the way to take Jesus' instruction is to recognize that, witting or unwitting, we put stuff out into the world. Sometimes it's not great, because we still have some wickedness and folly in our hearts. But those things are never a deal-breaker, because we also have the grace to look at our own flaws without fearing that seeing them will destroy us, like the Basilisk. There is always enough grace to nurture growth.

Teacher Jesus, too often we blame external people and situations for our heartaches and brokenness. Help us to look inward to uncover and heal the things that defile: bitterness, hatred, jealousy, and greed. Help us instead to be agents of peace, hope, generosity, and love. Amen.