

“Upside Down”

So, who “has the say” at your house? Husbands and wives often joke about “who wears the pants in the family” – but there is often a lot of tension behind this “joking.” Even more alarming is when children are telling their parents what to do – and they do it!

Dearly beloved, this is not good. It’s out of line – contrary to God’s created order and design for our families. It’s upside down. We need to repent, and walk in the way of the Lord – for His way is a blessing to all involved.

Today we are dealing with the question of “Who has the say?” – not just with husband and wives, parents and children – but with all who are disciples of Jesus Christ.

We begin in Isaiah – where we heard the Lord rebuke His people for drawing near to Him with their mouth and honoring Him with their lips – while their hearts are far from Him, and “their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.”

In other words, God is rebuking His people for living as if they “have the say” with respect to God. You “hide deep from the Lord your counsel” He says – thinking the Lord doesn’t even know that you live as if your word is the last word. “You turn things upside down,” He says – a piercing condemnation – for we, His people, live as if we are God.

That’s the background for our Gospel reading today. The Pharisees and some of the scribes – the religious leaders, experts – come from Jerusalem to Jesus – but it His disciples that they put in the spotlight. “Your disciples,” they say. I hope you realize that they’re talking about you. You are in the spotlight.

“Your disciples” eat with hands that are defiled. The basis of their charge is not a matter of hygiene or public health – they are saying that His disciples are ceremonially unclean – they cannot enter the Temple – they are cut off from the presence of God. While they, on the other hand, are clean. They wash – they baptize everything! WE are ceremonially clean. WE have access to God’s presence. WE are good with God.

They target His disciples, but their accusations are really against Jesus. “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” Do you hear what they are saying? Why don’t you straighten out your disciples? Why do they – and YOU – not follow our words – listen to our counsel – follow our tradition?

And now Jesus pivots the spotlight to shine squarely on them. “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

They’re hypocrites. They pretend to be faithful children of God – holy, pious, true worshippers – but it’s all “vain,” empty, void. They are not even hiding it (as we heard in the reading from Isaiah) – they are publicly, openly, showing that they have turned things upside down. They are telling God what to do – to His very face!

Like children telling their parents what to do – to their face – this is even more telling. It is man boldly playing God – putting God in the place they have assigned for Him – and thinking all along that they are “good with God.”

Folks, this is “not good” – and we must repent of doing this very thing. We do it when we tell ourselves it’s okay to cheat and steal because that’s just the way business is done. We do this when we are sexually immoral – and we wash our hands, we baptize our actions – thinking we have hidden our dark deeds from the Lord.

Let us see our words and actions for what they are – a defiant breaking of the First Commandment – playing God – pretending that God is pleased with us, even while we do not fear, love and trust in Him above all things. Let us repent, for our sins are “not good” – they are harmful to us, and others.

I don’t know if you noticed this, or not – but Jesus is really addressing the twofold shape of the Christian’s life here in our text. That twofold shape which He desires is that we live in FAITH toward God, and in LOVE toward our fellow man.

He directs us in this life by His Word. He shows us, and by the working of the Holy Spirit, He empowers us to live in this way – and this is for our good, for our benefit, and for the benefit of those the Lord has placed around us.

The first problem with the Pharisees and scribes (and all who play God) – is that their worship is in vain, empty. The highest form of worship is to receive what God promises and offers. He teaches us how the sinner is made to be clean, and therefore able to live in His presence – and it is not by doing, but receiving.

To trust in our washings, our traditions, so that we may be clean – is to reject Christ's washing in His blood – which is the only way to be cleansed of our sin. He baptizes us, washes away our iniquities, makes us to be the children of God, and leads us to live in the presence our heavenly Father.

This is good. This is true worship. This is how God restores us into His good graces – through His Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. That is why we, as His disciples – confess our sins, repent – and trust in Jesus for our life with God.

But there is also an impact on our fellow man – whom we are to love – as the Lord directs us. The religious leaders came up with their own practices (their tradition of Corban) – which rejected the love of parents according to the Fourth Commandment – and in the end, harms our parents.

So it is when we set aside God's Word and replace it with our own – when we play God, and neglect those who need our love. We make up our own traditions which seem so pious to us – but end up hurting our neighbor.

Dearly beloved, let us not love God and our fellow man with empty words – but with FAITH in God and His Word. The Lord has given you His very own Son – so that in Him you are clean, holy and precious in His sight – so that you might have life – a blessing to your neighbor, and to you for all eternity. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.