

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Pure Heart

Matthew 23:23-28

During Black History Month, one of the figures who comes to the fore is Frederick Douglass, America's most famous abolitionist. Douglass was an escaped slave who became a prominent activist, author, and public speaker. His efforts to end the practice of slavery were driven by many factors, including his radical Christian faith. Douglass had formally converted to the Christian faith as a teenager, under the shepherding of a group of free black Methodists.

When he was about 15 years old, Douglass was sent from Baltimore back to the Eastern Shore, where he worked for the next three years as a field hand, before escaping and settling in Massachusetts. He became involved in the abolition movement, and decried the gap between the Christianity preached by Christ and the Christianity practiced in America. According to Douglass the problem wasn't Jesus or the Christian faith, but the hypocrisy of Christians. As one writer has put it, Douglass "blasted 'the man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week, fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus.' He derided the slaveholder who 'covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity.'"

In one instance, Douglass drew upon the themes and language of today's text from Matthew. He condemned slaveholders and their apologists who "attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith."¹ Douglas echoes Jesus' criticism of some of the religious leaders, who were more concerned about outward displays of piety than about truly pursuing the priorities of God.

Beware of hypocrisy. That's Matthew's message for the community to which he's writing. Keep in mind that our text reflects serious tensions between Jewish leaders and Jewish Christian leaders in that historical context. Matthew's church members were still looking to the Jewish Law for guidance in how to live, which in some respects was appropriate. But that included looking to the Jewish religious leaders, in how they interpreted and practiced the Law. And according to Jesus, that's where the problem comes in. Some of the religious leaders can't see the forest for the trees. It's not as if they're phonies. They may be very sincere in their faith. But they're majoring in minors. They're so focused on the minutiae of the Law and obedience to it, that they've lost sight of the most important aspects of living rightly with God and with others.

In order to get their observance of the Law more in line with its original intent, Jesus says that some of the religious leaders need to do some interior work. They need to search their hearts. That's where we are in today's Scripture passage. Hearing today's text is like stepping into the sanctuary about halfway through Jesus' sermon. By this point, he's really on a roll, rattling off a string of warnings against religious leaders who care more about outward appearance than inward purity. It's good that they're pursuing purity, holiness,

and righteousness. But the way they're going about it is out of sync with the Law's goal and purpose.

The Law doesn't condone turning religious devotion into an external show. Yet that's what some of the religious leaders seem most concerned about. Earlier in Matthew 23, Jesus warned about religious leaders who practice conspicuous piety, who crave publicity and seek out the limelight. They love their titles and never pass up a photo op (vv. 5-7). So when it comes to hypocrisy, maybe there's more going on here than just inconsistency between words and deeds, between faith proclaimed and faith practiced. Maybe hypocrisy also includes using religion in service of very irreligious goals. As John Boykin has put it, "What He [Jesus] nailed them for was that they were using God and the things of God as a means to some other end. . . . What greater affront to God could there be? Better to ignore him altogether than to exploit him as a means to something else you value more highly."²

Preaching one thing and doing another. Turning God's teaching into more of a burden than a blessing. Using holy practices for personal glory rather than God's glory. No wonder Jesus launched into this litany of warnings about external religion without inward integrity. Our Lord says, "You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will also be clean" (vv. 25b-26). Jesus may be alluding to a debate among his contemporaries about whether the inside of the cup became contaminated if the outside was ritually unclean and vice versa. But rather than debate the fine points about the purity of dishes, Jesus seizes the opportunity to make a point about purity of the heart. Clean the inside of the cup, and the outside will take care of itself.

Jesus then reinforces his point with another image. In this case, he may be alluding to the practice of whitewashing tombs, so that passersby, especially religious pilgrims, could avoid contact with a burial site and guard against becoming ritually unclean. According to Jesus, larger, and deeper, issues are in play, namely, that when it comes to faithfulness and obedience to the will of God, an ostentatious exterior can conceal a corrupt interior.

Earlier in today's service, we celebrated the ordinance of Christian baptism. Destynie stood before us to publicly declare her faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In many ways, the act of baptism takes interior matters and makes them exterior. What's happening inwardly is made visible outwardly, through dramatic gestures and vivid symbols. One of those symbols is the white robe worn by the baptismal candidate. Among other things, it signifies being clothed with the purity and righteousness of Christ.

In last Sunday's Scripture from Ephesians, we listened as Paul said, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:22-24). So Christian conversion is about changing clothes. One of the first questions we regularly get after scheduling someone's baptism is, "What should I wear?" That's an important question to address before the time comes to step into the water. But it's also a critical question to answer after coming out of the water. As you go forward in your new life in Christ, what should you wear?

You should cloth yourself with Christ, who has done for you what you could not do for yourself. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Christ has reconciled you to God and restored you to the righteousness, holiness, and purity that God intends for you. Baptism signifies that by God's grace, through faith, you're joined to Christ. What's his is yours. So each day, you're to cloth yourself with Christ.

This doesn't just mean an outward appearance of religiosity. Now I say that carefully because externals do matter. Remember that Jesus warns the religious leaders, "First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will be clean" (v. 26). So he's not replacing externals with internals. He's declaring that spiritual integrity requires both. Your outward conduct, visible to others, is inseparable from your inward condition, the state of your heart.

The *Queen Mary* was the largest ship to cross the oceans when it was launched in 1936. Through four decades and a world war she served until she was retired, anchored as a floating hotel and museum. During the conversion, her three massive smokestacks were taken off to be scraped down and repainted. But on the dock they crumbled. It turns out that nothing remained of the 3/4-inch steel plate from which the stacks had been formed. All that was left were the more than 30 coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The steel had rusted away.³ By that point, there was no real substance, only an external appearance.

Jesus warns us about appearing righteous on the outside, while on the inside there's spiritual deterioration and decay. That's why you and I need to pay careful attention to the condition of our hearts. Putting on the white robe and stepping into the water is one thing. But clothing yourself daily with the purity of Christ is another. That requires vigilance and steady devotion to being renewed in the image of God. It means applying yourself to inner cleansing and spiritual transformation. It means joining the psalmist who prays, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (51:10).

Preacher and writer John Bunyan once noted, "Religion is the best armor a man can have, but it is the worst cloak." Jesus warns us not to just cloak ourselves with religion, but to be inwardly armored with the kind of righteousness that produces a pure life, a life that reflects the holiness of God.

So Destynie, and each of you who confesses Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, clean the inside of the cup, and the outside will take care of itself. A lot of our religious devotion is on display here today. Our acts of piety and expressions of faith are visible to one another, especially the very public act of baptism. But so much of the critical work that eventually shows up on the outside of our lives takes place on the inside. So guard your hearts. Devote yourself to the daily work of interior renovation. Open the door for God to do more of the internal cleansing that you need. Whatever is unholy and corrupting, seek the purifying presence of the Spirit to fill you and transform you. Through prayer, self-examination, and the Word, let God search your heart and reveal to you the inner thoughts, attitudes, inclinations, and patterns that are contrary to his will and purpose. Seek his forgiveness and the power to be repentant. Pursue purity of heart, and put on Christ.

¹ Douglass is quoted in D. H. Dilbeck, "The Radical Faith of Frederick Douglass." *Christianity Today* (January/February 2018) n.p.

² John Boykin, in *The Gospel of Coincidence*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 39, No. 5.

³ From *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: from Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 118.