

Our Lady of Dallas
22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time
September 2, 2012
Deacon John Bayer
Mark 7:1-8; 14-15; 21-23

In today's Gospel, Christ makes a familiar distinction. There is, on the one hand, the "worship of the lips," or the worship that begins and ends on the **surface** of things. It is a worship limited to empty words and gestures; it does not reach beneath even the skin of our humanity. Those who worship only with the lips may say and do "the right thing," but they do it not because they **are** good and right, but because they want to **appear** good and right before others. On the other hand, there is the "worship of the heart," or the worship that begins and ends in God. It is the worship that comes from God and imbues every layer of our being, catching everything we are and drawing it all back into God. Those who offer the worship of the heart consent to God's activity deep within themselves; they allow him to change not only their words and actions, but also their **thoughts** and **desires**. This is true worship, the worship God asks for.

In today's Gospel, Christ rebukes a group of Pharisees for their failure to offer this kind of worship: "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors me with their **lips**, but their **hearts** are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts" (Mark 7:6). These Pharisees, in spite of being religious leaders, failed to offer the **true** worship of God, the worship of the heart. Instead of heeding God's call for **total** and **interior** conversion, they gave only some small part of themselves. They gave only the time and treasure that was necessary for the formal observance of their purification laws. Instead of entrusting their lives to the Word of God, they looked for salvation in the fulfillment of human traditions and social expectations. Instead of giving to God what he was

actually asking for—the deep conversion of their hearts—they offered only what made them **feel** adequate in the sight of their peers. While claiming to fulfill their duty to God, in reality they offered only what would allow them to rise in the opinion of human beings.

The error of the Pharisees is obvious: they tried to fulfill the law of God through a merely formal observance. They were willing to wash their hands, but not their hearts. They focused only on outward appearances, and neglected to concern themselves with the inner reality. Though they knew the Scriptures, they did not understand them: they had heard from the Prophet Hosea that God desires love, and **not** empty sacrifices (Hosea 6:6); and they had heard the words of the Psalmist: “For in sacrifice you take no delight, burnt offering from me you would refuse; my sacrifice is a contrite spirit. A humbled, contrite **heart** you will not spurn” (Psalm 51: 18-19). They were familiar with the Scriptures. And so they should have known that God wants to receive from us an offering that reaches into our hearts, not one that reaches only into our wallets and our time. But instead of giving God the worship he asks for, the worship of the heart, the worship of interior conversion and faith in his saving love, they reduced their religious devotions to the level of appearances, to the level of social customs and traditions.

But we should be careful when judging the Pharisees. Actually, we really ought to resist the temptation to put a major distance between ourselves and “those Pharisees” that Jesus rebukes during his ministry. For, ironically, we prove ourselves **most like them** precisely when we make such judgments, when we look at “those bad Pharisees” as something totally foreign to ourselves. It was, after all, **a Pharisee** who in Luke’s Gospel proclaimed, “Lord, I thank you that I am **not like other** men...” (Luke 18:11). Rather than taking today’s reading as an opportunity to judge other people—no matter how long ago they lived—I think it is much more correct,

and certainly more fruitful, to take it as an invitation to examine our own virtue and behavior.

After all, do not we too sometimes prefer the worship of the eyes? Are we so sure that our virtue reaches down into our hearts? Is there an extent to which our outward discipline and behavior—correct as they may be—are determined more by our need to conform to social customs set by our peers, than by the genuine goodness of our hearts? Like the Pharisees, we too are “scholars of the law.” We have been blessed to hear the Word of God and to know about his plan for our salvation. We have heard Christ’s call for **interior** conversion: “**Repent** and **believe** in the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). How well are we responding to this call? Is our conversion reaching down into our hearts? Or are we sometimes content to allow outward appearances to be the extent of our offering?

These can be hard questions to face sometimes. But if our goal really is to offer God the worship of our hearts, to repent and believe with everything we have and are, then we must be prepared to face them. Without falling either into the error of self-deception or the error of scrupulosity, we must be willing to do the sometimes painful work of examining our conscience. For in the Gospel of Matthew, Christ says plain and simple, “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

So, I invite you now to endure, with me, a brief examination of conscience. Using three items from the list of sins in today’s Gospel, let us ask ourselves whether or not there is anything **we** might be substituting for the worship of the heart, for the call to **interior** conversion and faith.

“Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile. From within people, from their hearts, come evil

thoughts, **un-chastity**, theft, **murder**, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, **envy**, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile.”

Un-Chastity: How strong are we in the virtue of chastity? Is it like an extrinsic leash preventing us from doing something awful and embarrassing? Or is it a part of who we are, something that reaches all the way down into our heart, into the seedbed of thoughts and desires that no one else can see? Does our chastity leave us with the **joy** proper to the one whose heart is pure and in love with the vocation God has given? Or do we live with tortured and divided hearts, lusting and coveting after the lives and gifts of other people?

Murder: Have we committed murder? Most likely not in a way that will cause any official of the State to be alarmed. But should our Father in heaven be concerned? St. John says, “Whoever **hates** his brother is a murderer” (1 John 3:15). Of course, it is in an obvious sense not the same thing to hate someone as to take his life. And yet, the muscles that allow a murderer to pull the trigger on a fellow human being find their strength from the heart. And though we might never even touch a gun, our hearts can still swell with motions uncomfortably similar to those of a murderer. Is there anyone I have **wished** away? Is there someone I can’t stand to think about under any circumstance, someone I just have to pretend doesn’t exist? Is there someone the sight of whom arouses in me uncontrollable feelings of bitterness, prejudice, and anger? Do I have **hate** in my heart?

Envy: How do we react when God in his generosity, bestows gifts upon other people—gifts that he apparently has not given to us, or at least not in the same measure? Most likely we do not try physically to steal or sabotage them. We might even, with some anxiety and shifting eyes, find the strength to muster a word of congratulation. “Good job. I’m really happy for you.” But **are** we really happy, or

do we rage inside? In such moments, do we really have peace and joy in our hearts? Can we honestly say within ourselves, “I consider x to be of great value. And it is obvious to me and to everyone else that so-and-so is better than I am in x . Whenever I do x , so-and-so can do it better. God, in his wonderful wisdom, has arranged it this way, and so I am happy. Moreover, I love him for giving to my neighbor so great a gift, and for allowing me to participate in that gift by recognizing and rejoicing over it.” These are beautiful words, but they can be hard words to say! And yet anything less is inadequate for the worship of the heart.

By now we may see a little better how challenging it can be to offer the worship of our hearts. It can be very difficult, even painful, to change our minds and opinions, our attitudes and desires. St. Therese of Lisieux once wrote, “It costs our heart’s blood to give God what he wants...” God wants us to become saints, to become women and men with hearts patterned upon the heart of his only begotten Son, a man whose heart was so powerful and pure, he could love others “to the end” (John 13:1), even through misunderstanding, abandonment, betrayal, and crucifixion. No matter what he endured, he remained with an undivided and loving heart; not even the faintest cobweb of bitterness, jealousy, or hatred resided within him. Salvation means learning to live and love like that; it means having a heart like Christ’s.

This examination of our conscience, like every examination, humbling as it may be, should not end with anything but joy. Why? Because God loves us. Our vocation is to become children of God—to **live and love** with hearts like the heart of his only begotten Son. But the glory of our destiny should **never** give us cause for despair, no matter **how** far away from it we may think we are. “God is faithful. And it is by **him** that we were called into fellowship with his Son” (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:9). God **wants** us to be with him, to become pure and good like him, to share in his life of love and peace. Salvation was his idea; and he **will** see it through, if only we will

consent to his work in us. This is why we prayed at the opening of this morning's mass: "God of might, giver of every good gift, **put into our hearts** the love of your name..." And this is why at the closing of this mass we will pray, "Renewed by this bread from the heavenly table, we beseech you, Lord, that, **being the food of charity, it may confirm our hearts** and stir us to serve you in our neighbor." In a few moments we will consume the food of charity, through which God himself will take up residence in our hearts to teach and nourish them. Let us allow the humility we feel from the recognition of our weakness to fill us with anticipation for the sacrament of our redemption. We may not be worthy that the Lord should enter under our roof, but he has only to say the Word and we shall be healed.