

## *Rend Hearts, Not Garments*

Joel 2: 12-19 Luke 18: 9-14

One of the TED Talks that I share with my prison class on Life Mapping is one done by Dan Ariely entitled “Our Buggy Moral Code.” Ariely is a behavioral economist who became interested in group behaviors around moral choices.

At that time, energy trading company Enron was in the midst of a scandalous meltdown due to a corrupt corporate culture. Corporate types at every level were busy painting some pretty lipstick on a dead pig of a company, deceiving investors, including employees whose retirement accounts were almost entirely in company stocks, and losing billions.

He created his TED Talk 4 years ago after the far more widespread and dangerous corruption on Wall Street wrecked the nation’s economy and damaged many sectors of the world economy as well.

Most recently, Wells Fargo has found itself damaged by fraud and corruption happening at several levels of the organization, a story which is still unfolding, and has led to the early retirement of its CEO, claw-back of millions in bonus compensation for the CEO, and the beginning of sweeping reforms in corporate culture.

In every instance, these being only a few, and surely not the last, the corporate culture set norms that permitted moral lapses. When something lacks integrity and gets established as the norm of an organization, the organization becomes corrupt and will eventually damage itself greatly, if not lead to its demise. This has happened plenty in churches, too. I know from firsthand experience.

For the men in my prison class, they need to know that integrity stands apart from the norms established by any group. Norms must have integrity, but not all norms have integrity simply because they’re accepted within a group. Whether in prison or in the free world, the associations established by these men, and the normative values within those associations, matter tremendously. They will be highly determinative of the values that they uphold, and they need to have integrity. Otherwise, trouble is guaranteed to follow.

Moral and ethical faults inevitably start with the individual. These faults or sins can affect any relationship. Their presence corrupts whatever trust existed in the relationship, and their discovery or revelation leads to the inevitable breach that destroys the trust and severs the relationship. Restoration or renewal of that relationship is dependent on sincere confession and contrition for the sinful transgression, and a desire to what’s necessary to bring healing and reconciliation.

We know how this works in personal relationships because I’d that we have all been there, done that. We have all had the experience of screwing up a fine relationship by doing something stupid and thoughtless, and then had to do something to try to

mend fences and bring the relationship back to some decent footing. But what happens when it **concerns our relationship with God**? Is it different?

Face-to-face with someone, we know how the outcome is dependent on candor and sincerity. But don't have the same context when we come before God. How do we know that what we're doing has the desired effect? This is where religion comes in.

The norm of confession and contrition before God is well established not only in Judaism and Christianity, but also in every major religion. It is usually formed into a particular ritual act designed to show remorse, often involving an offering together with a petition for forgiveness. But does this provide the necessary candor and sincerity? Ritual may be seen as the effective way for sacred reconciliation to occur, but we also know that ritual can lose its meaning, becoming routine and even trite.

The prophet Joel in chapter 2 relates God's word to God's sinful people, having declared that "the day of the Lord is coming ... a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness," and the host of nasty things scheduled for that day. The corruption and sinfulness of God's people have brought about this day of reckoning.

With this specter looming, our passage opens, *Even now* [with this ghastly day set on the calendar], *says the Lord, (re)turn to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.*

What we do not hear is the call to do 'business as usual.' For one thing, 'business as usual' would seem to have meant accepting corruption and sinfulness in social and religious expressions as normative, standard, acceptable behavior. We can look at other prophetic writings to get the specifics, but generally it has meant dismissing the expectations of God and acting as if there is no God with expectations of God's people, or in short, acting as if there is no God at all who truly matters.

For another, we can also imagine that the priests have been doing their ritual thing and people have been engaging in their ritual thing with the priests, however these rituals have become impotent expressions of a people that are truly indifferent to what God expects from them. They've become routine and meaningless.

God says in effect through Joel that there is no sincerity in previous acts of confession and contrition. The emptiness of these rituals reflects a sinful spirit that is unmoved to do anything differently. God has no reason to withhold the promised wrath and condemnation. Yet here we find God is urging his people to do the right thing, to sincerely come before God, sincerely show regret, commit to turning things around, and earnestly petition for the gracious mercy of your God. It isn't too late, but truly, they're warned, the typical ritual act isn't enough. *Rend your hearts, not your garments.*

The prophet allows that there is no guarantee that their acts of confession and contrition are going to change the outcome, but the possibility certainly exists, and the love of God for God's people should never be in doubt.

Something seems odd when it says: *Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the Lord, your God?* This is not having the **people** leave grain and drink offerings for God, but **God** leaves grain and drink offerings for the people. Apparently the ravages of drought and pestilence described earlier in Joel have so decimated the land that the people don't even have food or drink to make any offering to God in their ritual. By forgoing the ritual for lack of elements, the people are left without a meaningful ritual to perform. However, the prophet Joel seizes on this condition as the **right one** for the people to dispense with ritual and truly come with a repentant heart and a changed spirit, ready to offer their sincerest confession and contrition. Doing this, God may bless them, but in no way does Joel suggest that their actions will put any requirement on God. Forgiveness will be by the grace of God alone.

Faithfully and sincerely acting in the manner described by Joel, the prophet shares God's good news: *In response to his people the Lord said: I am sending you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a mockery among the nations.*

The factors of sincerity and integrity are of the highest importance in the acts of God's people before their God. This is critical when we come to terms with our own sinfulness measured against God's true expectations from us.

We had a worthwhile discussion about the **true nature** of sin in Sunday School as we talked about the Letter to the Hebrews. It concerned the function of the High Priest who intercedes with God for the sinfulness of God's people. This had changed as the writer of Hebrews saw Jesus taking this role of High Priest, interceding for all of God's people with Jesus' **own** sacrifice for the sinfulness of God's people.

Without belaboring the point, we realized that sinfulness was **not** what we tend to imagine. In fact, our quick response to what is sinfulness often has us citing rather trivial items of behavior when in fact, sinfulness consists of more substantial matters which are every bit as common and problematic as those trivial items.

My point is that our measures for what constitutes sinfulness are often taken from traditional understandings, cultural norms, or whatever things seem problematic in our own behavior. What if we got it all wrong when we considered the true nature of sinfulness?

Let's briefly consider the two worshipers at the Temple in the parable told by Jesus. Each one has come to present himself before God. One is a Pharisee while the other is a tax collector.

The Pharisee stands and prays, thanking God that he is not like others – thieves, prostitutes, drug addicts, pedophiles, a candidate for president, or even scum like that tax collector. Proudly the Pharisee noted that he fasts twice a week and tithes all of his earnings.

The tax collector stood away, refusing to look up, and beat his breast saying, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The tax collector would seem to be admitting that he was not only a wretched scuzz bucket, but as far as being faithful to God, he *never* fasts and doesn’t tithe *any* of his substantial earnings. Frankly, there is no redeeming quality to him, unless you consider that sniveling appeal to God for mercy as sincere.

Jesus said that this tax collector was the one who went home justified before God. He knew what he was and admitted his sinfulness. He felt unworthy to be there, standing at a distance from his fellow worshiper, and keeping his face turned down in shame. He made no pretense to being anything but loathsome to God, having failed in obedience and service in every possible way. He speaks directly to God and considers nothing else besides his own sinfulness before God. Yet Jesus clearly states that **this** guy was justified, having had his relationship set aright with God.

The Pharisee on the other hand was so thoroughly self-deceived that he could not even imagine any sins that he’d committed. After extolling his own virtue, he looks sidelong at the tax collector with despising and derision, comparing himself to the obvious and woeful sinner. He so completely admired himself, believed his own justification, and was so enthralled with his own righteousness, he never got the first hint about his actual standing before God. This Pharisee believes that what is normative for him is what is normative for God. Yet such norms miss God’s love and grace, God’s compassion and justice, and God’s peace and healing, all aspects of new life in the Kingdom.

Could we have missed a higher understanding of God’s expectations of us and of what constitutes sinfulness to God? Could we be so self-deceived as the Pharisee? Heaven forbid!

Imagine the Son of God comes to us and asks:

- *Are you storing up riches in heaven?* Your checkbook answers: He’s got it all in blue chip stocks and tax free bonds!
- *Are you feeding the hungry?* From the garage comes a voice, He had to buy a huge freezer to keep all his food.
- *Are you clothing the naked?* From the bedroom closet comes a voice: He’s got enough clothes so that he could wear something different every day for a month.
- *Are you at least being gracious, forgiving, and reconciling?* From the computer comes a voice: His emails and his Facebook show that he’s been badmouthing people, spreading rumors, judging people left and right, and trying to cheat on his taxes. Computers!

We need to always remember that God’s expectations are of quite a different order from what our expectations are. The norms that we may have established do not necessarily reflect what God and Jesus have said are explicitly important for the Kingdom. And they may be off base even though there are lots of people who think the same way. The corrupt group that sets its norms ends up setting corrupt norms. The fact

that we're all sinners is probably not in dispute. What sinfulness truly consists of is the question. That's an interesting conversation that I don't think you would like.

Most importantly, may we not be lulled into false righteousness simply because we come to church, say a corporate prayer of confession, dutifully listen to the boring preacher, and repeat the process on a regular basis. That isn't going to produce a scintilla of righteousness, a hint of justification, or a crumb of substance for the Kingdom of God. It may teach us how to orientate ourselves in humility and come before God with sincerity and integrity, seeking to rend our hearts, not our garments, seeking his grace and peace, and not our own.