

There is a certain harshness about the gospel reading this morning. In fact, every time I read this passage I am struck by the ferociousness of our Lord's apparent attack on what was clearly normative Jewish religious practice. This whole passage seems, at first glance, an unreasonable assault on piety and this is not the sort of thing that you would expect from Jesus. So, while I'm surprised, afresh, each time I read this, I remind myself that the folk of our Lord's culture tended to express themselves in extremes and that Jesus frequently taught by making a comment intended to arouse strong feeling and then made his point over and against it. But let's look at this passage in a little depth, so that we understand.

Did Jesus condemn Jewish piety? The answer is, "No!" In this passage, he condemned vain worship. He said that if your heart is not in your religion, if you are just going through the motions, then you are being idolatrous, in fact, you are mocking God. That is not a healthy and wise thing to do.

What's this all about? This ritual washing stuff, which the passage talks about, is what Jewish people call "kosher." It was normative practice for Jews in Jesus' time. In fact, it was our Lord's daily practice. I think it is a given that Jesus tended to be a bit relaxed about some religious rules, especially those that he saw as incidental and insignificant, but this is because Jesus focused on what really mattered: purity of heart, the love of God and the love of neighbor. But Jesus practiced kosher, because kosher honored God. What I'm saying is that the Lord's piety – his practice of kosher – truly reflected his heart, a heart that honored God the Father. He expected the same of others. Jesus had zero tolerance for those who were pious only on the outside, while their hearts were hard and dark. In our passage, his dismay brought about a reflection on the prophet Isaiah. "Isaiah really told the truth about you hypocrites," Jesus said. "You honor God with your lips, but not with your heart, and your worship is nothing but vanity."

With this comment, Jesus presents us with a very essential teaching that conveys a difficult thing to hear. It is not that God does not appreciate our piety. God loves our piety, when it comes from the heart, because it reflects our awe and our love of him. The point that our Lord was making to the religious leaders of his day, and that he makes to us today, is this. That which is good, when it comes from a faithful heart, is offensive in the extreme to God when it is divorced from faith. If it is artificial, if it is mechanical, if it has lost its faith meaning, it then has become nothing but idolatry.

Seven hundred years before Christ, there was a Jewish prophet named Amos. Amos said something that still shouts God's truth to every ear that hears. Amos said, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings, and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps. I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

The way we live our lives, the ways we treat our neighbor are the ways we show our love for and our faith in Jesus Christ. We must never forget our Lord's last commandment, delivered the night before he died. "Love one another even as I love you." An undefiled heart can love purely. A defiled heart cannot love at all. *Amen.*