

A Clean Heart

Matthew 15:17-20

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I'm going to swear so get ready, ok? It's just a mild swear because I wasn't good at swearing at all. Ok, are you ready? Damn! All right? Now, that wasn't hard, was it? It wasn't hard for you, but still, apart from an illustration, it's still wrong. Doesn't matter whether it was hard or not, it's just as wrong as committing adultery, because Jesus said you shouldn't swear by anything in heaven or anything on earth -- and you shouldn't commit adultery -- so it's still wrong, apart from using it as an illustration.

But still why, even apart from that, did you feel "yeah, it wasn't too bad!"? I mean why did all of us feel "well, yes, it's kind of a surprise for you to say 'damn', but it didn't seem too evil, really!" Now, why did it not seem too evil? Why? Why did it not, especially to you who didn't even say it, why did it not seem too evil? And would you not say, "well, I mean, your heart wasn't in it, your heart wasn't in it! You were just saying it because you wanted to illustrate something to us, and your heart really wasn't in it!" And that is right, isn't it? My heart wasn't in it and your heart wasn't in it. Now that still doesn't make it right, it's still wrong, even if your heart isn't in it, apart from using it, as we did, as an illustration, it's still wrong! It's still something that God has commanded us not to do! Still, it is helpful to make a distinction between temptation and sin.

Because that is part of the distinction between temptation and sin. You see, just the way that word that I spoke came to you and you weren't worked up about it at all, it just came to you -- it didn't find any response in your heart, you just heard it and you said "oh, that's interesting! Surprising, but interesting!" --but it just came to you -- so all through the day you are in situations where thoughts from the mental atmosphere around you insert themselves into your head. Where emotions, from the emotional atmosphere around you, inject themselves at times into your feelings. And as long as your response to them is as detached as your response to my 'damn' was, then there is no sin. You see that? As long as those thoughts can come in, or those feelings come in from outside and you are as utterly detached from them as you were to my swear this morning, then there is no sin. As long as you can say "well, that's interesting, I've no interest in it but yeah, well there it is. Well, that's a thought I know where it's come from, but I don't want to think it myself, I don't want to dwell on it another second; well that's an interesting feeling that's passing through our office. I'm observing it academically, it has no answer in my own heart, no responsive chord in my own heart, but that's a feeling that obviously is present in our office or in our family." Then as long as that's the attitude, you're dealing with temptation and not with sin.

But if I tell you, "you know the vacation you are arranging? Well, your travel agent made the reservation on the wrong date, so you can't go on vacation", or if I say to you, "You know your car? Well, there's a drunk driver just totaled it a moment ago." Or if I say to you, "You're fired! The company is closing down" and then there's a "damn!" rising out of your heart, then that's sin! So, do you see, there is a distinction in the two things? A sin is what comes from the heart of a person, what comes from the very innermost being of a person, that's what sin is. And whether we like it or not, we live in a world that is full of sin and there are all kinds of sinful acts and

thoughts and words going on all around us and they may even pass for a moment through your head, they may even pass for a moment through your emotions, as long as the moment you are aware of them, you turn against them and you regard them as alien and you regard them as something that is separate from you, then it's not sin. But when your heart rises and embraces the picture or embraces the thought or embraces the feeling, or your mind commits itself or your will commits its emotions to thinking or feeling it a second second, then that's sin. But sin is what comes out of the heart and that's what Jesus said. He said it isn't actually the thoughts that come into your head from outside that are sin, it isn't even the feelings that come in from outside that are sin, it isn't even the food that comes in through your mouth, but it's what comes from inside.

Now, maybe you'd look at that verse because it does put it very plainly. In Matthew 15:17, "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands, does not defile a man." Do you see in verse 18: "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this defiles a man." That's it, loved ones. It's not what you eat or even what you drink or even the thoughts that other people pass on to you that defiles you. It's what comes out of your heart and mind. That's what dirties us. That's what defiles us.

[Illustration: Holding up a bottle of sour milk and smelling it:]

It's - ugh! Sour! Sour milk! And the whole life is filled with it, just filled with it. And you meet Jesus and you know that it's wrong and you repent and you pour it out in repentance and He puts fresh milk in. Except that before he put the fresh milk in, after you'd poured it out, your heart was like that (sour) - in other words you know what was still coating it: still some of that sour milk. Still some of the old spoiled rotten stuff was still in your heart, so He came in and He poured his Spirit in, in on top of that. But because that old sour milk was still there, of course it isn't long before the new fresh Spirit of Jesus is contaminated and your life is as full of sin as it was before.

That's the situation with so many of us. We've received the Spirit of Jesus. In a sense, He has made us alive. He has made us aware of God. We actually even have great respect for Jesus and some acquaintance with Him. But our heart was never cleared of the sour stuff that was still at the bottom. And actually you know fine well there's only one way to make that bottle fit to contain fresh milk and to keep it fresh for a long period of time. There's only one way in which fresh milk can abide in that bottle without becoming contaminated and that is that I pour out the sour stuff and then I put it under a faucet and I wash it right out, and I wash all the sour stuff out from the bottom of the heart and then I bring in the fresh milk and then there is every possibility that the fresh milk will remain sweet and fresh.

The tragedy with so many of us is we haven't gone that far, you see. We received the Spirit of Christ in some sense into our hearts, but He is not able to dwell there and abide there because there is sour self spirit that has never been cleaned out of the heart, from the bottom of the heart. And so, we find that our life is like that, up and down. Every time we get a new filling of Jesus' Spirit it kind of overwhelms the sour stuff at the bottom of the heart and we walk for a while in victory -- then we begin to take another dip as the sour stuff spreads all over His Spirit and then it comes Easter time and we get another infusion of His Spirit and so we walk in victory for another little while but really our life is like that, up and down, switch back.

And actually the truth is that our nature has never changed. Our nature has never really changed. Our heart -- deep, deep down -- is still unclean. Our heart has never been cleansed by the Holy Spirit, and we have a sense of aliveness to God and we have a sense of our sins being forgiven, but our heart is still unclean and continues to contaminate Jesus' Spirit every time He pours it in. And so, in a way, our nature has not been changed, it's been just overwhelmed from time to time, by Jesus' Spirit. Loved ones, that's why we cry that cry of despair so often, even those of us who are children of God. That cry in Roman 7:15: "I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." The only mistake is this! We are confusing the issue by using "I" in both cases. In actual fact there is something deep down in your heart that DOES do what it wants! And that's what actually produces the evil in your life and mine. It's the unclean heart that still wants what Jesus doesn't want and it would be better for us to say: "Well, I don't understand MY own actions because Jesus wants to do certain things in me when He comes in, but my own heart doesn't want to do those things."

Loved ones, that's the situation with many of us, I'm sure, here in this room this morning. That we have in some sense been acted upon by God's Spirit and in some sense we're a little further on than the Jew; we are at least regenerated and we are aware of God and alive to God and we know that He has forgiven us our sins. But actually we are very like the Jew in that our nature -- deep, deep down -- is still unchanged and our heart is still unclean and that heart continues to send up sin as we try to walk progressively with Jesus. There is a verse, you know, in the Old Testament that I think makes it very clear and will help you to understand it if you look at it. It's Ezekiel, and it's a verse where God is describing the New Covenant to the Jewish people and it's Ezekiel 36:26. God is describing the New Covenant: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

So God will do two things, you see. He'll give us a new heart and then He will give us a new spirit and the new heart is explained a little more in the next verse, in verse 27: "And I will put my spirit within you." That's how He'll give us a new heart. He'll make our own spirits new, He'll put a new spirit within us, He'll renew our spirits, He'll regenerate our spirits and make us aware of God and aware of Jesus, so that we'll have some acquaintance with Him. But then, He'll put His own Spirit in us, you see -- "And I will put my spirit within you," (my Holy Spirit, He will dwell with you and stay inside you and He will create a new heart inside you) "and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances."

So there are two parts to the New Covenant. One is a new spirit and many of us have entered into that. Many of us have had our spirits renewed and regenerated and that's why we come to church here. We know that it's true; we know that God is real, we know that Jesus died for us, we know that our sins are forgiven and our spirit is renewed. But we know also an inconsistent Christian life, an up and down life. It seems when that little renewed spirit gets its way we are in victory, but it seems there are other times when that spirit isn't getting its way and that's because we haven't entered into the second part of the New Covenant, where God said: "I will put My Spirit in you, My Holy Spirit in you, to dwell in you and abide in you and He will create a new heart in you and He will enable you to walk in my statutes and observe my ordinances." Loved ones, the fact is there are many of us who call ourselves Christians, who have entered into only one part of the New Covenant that God gave us in Jesus. And that's the part that we find in I John 1:9, you remember, "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." We haven't entered into the second part: "and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Our hearts are still unclean, but we walk in the first part of the New Covenant: "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins."

So, it's amazing -- if you are a child of God, and you are in that situation, if you keep confessing and repenting day after day, and you keep getting shots of God's Spirit from Sunday services and you keep getting encouragement from other people's fellowship, you will be able to walk in a fair degree of obedience for awhile, but soon you will begin to see a nose dive taking place in your own life because the Holy Spirit does not dwell in you. He does not abide in you, He is not at home in your heart, He acts upon you from outside and at times is able to speak within you, but He does not dwell within you, because you have not allowed Him to prepare a dwelling place for Himself. And loved ones, the fact is the Holy Spirit cannot dwell there, He cannot dwell there! That's why He is called the Holy Spirit. He is holy! And unless your heart becomes holy, it's another crucifixion for Him, do you see that? It's crucifixion all over again. It's not just that He chooses not to do that, it's either He lives or you live, it's either He dies or you die. So He cannot come into a heart that is not prepared, a heart that has not been cleansed. That's why He has to, as it were, jump in and out -- act upon you, act upon you, act upon you -- from outside. That's why you are "up" when you are at service on Sunday.

That's it! Do you see that? That's why you are up, when you are at service on Sunday, because the Holy Spirit is all around you in all kinds of different people and He's acting upon you and He's strengthening you and then you get away from the service and you get into the middle of the afternoon or you get into the middle of the week and you begin to feel yourself weak in your relationship to God, because the Holy Spirit is not dwelling in you and so you are not getting any shots from outside. That's why, loved ones, as long as you're reading your Bible, as long as you are praying, then you are in victory. But as soon as you are on your own in the middle of a workday, then suddenly you sense a lack of God's presence. It's because the Holy Spirit is not dwelling in your heart and that's why, of course, so many of us are able to abstain from outward sin but not inward sin.

You remember those things that Jesus spoke about that come out from the heart. Many of us are able to abstain from fornication but our heart wants to fornicate. Many of us are able to abstain from adultery, but our heart wants to commit adultery. Many of us are able to abstain from murder, but our heart wants to murder. We find a rising from within us that would do damage to a person if we possibly could. That's why we're often able to abstain from theft, but our heart wants to steal. We are often able to abstain from slander, but our heart wants to slander. Now of course, the last two are what usually give away those Christians whose carnal nature is still alive inside them. That is, slander and backbiting. And that explains also why so many of us who are really carnal Christians with unclean hearts are so complacent about our state. Because most of the church is afraid of what the law can do to us or what society thinks of us. So many of us, who have become aware of God, don't want to have a reputation spoiled by getting into trouble with the law, so we abstain from murder and theft and adultery and fornication, but there are no legal penalties for gossip and backbiting and slander. And that's why so many of us in churches expose our unclean hearts not so much through the fornication or the adultery, but through the slander and the backbiting and the gossip -- through the talking about other people behind their back. And loved ones, that's how you can tell if you have an unclean heart.

Have you ever found yourselves talking about somebody behind their back instead of going to them in love and sharing with them what you can see or what you think? If you do that, if you talk about people behind their back, then your heart is unclean and you'll continue to allow that unclean heart to take you in an up and down Christian experience for the rest of your life -- if you can last throughout the rest of your life -- because increasingly that unclean heart clouds the voice of God,

just as that does. It clouds the voice of God and it clouds your sight of God and the more years you walk with that unclean heart the more difficult it is to hear His voice and that's why you'll find as you go on in your Christian life, without having your heart cleansed, you'll find: "I don't think I hear Him as clearly as I used to, I see men, but as trees walking." You haven't been touched the second time to be able to see them clearly as real men.

That's why many of us find that we talk about people behind their back. We say things about other people who seem to be different from us. We get into those little negative complaining groups, where we point at the other people who are maybe stupid or who are not very wise, but are trying to serve Jesus -- and have you ever found yourselves in one of those little negative complaining groups where everything you say it: "Oh, this is wrong, and that's wrong and I'm complaining, because they should do this, this way." Loved ones, if you find yourself doing that kind of thing, it's because your heart is unclean, your heart is dirty and that heart of yours will continue to send up that kind of motivation to you as long as it remains unclean.

Now, how do you get a clean heart? Loved ones, it is not by psychology and it is not by reading those "improve yourself" books. An unclean heart is something that only God can deal with. No man can deal with it and all you're doing with these books is putting cosmetics on an old barn that doesn't look too good and trying to make it look better. Unless you go to the heart of the problem, you'll never be delivered from that unclean heart. How do you get a clean heart? Well, you'll find it, loved ones, it's gloriously simple, it's Acts 15:8. And Peter is explaining what happened at the house of Cornelius. Acts 15:8: "And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith." That's how! You get your heart cleansed by the Holy Spirit through your faith. That's it! It's not a long, long series of trying to train yourself. It's not years and years of trying to reroute the thoughts and feelings of your heart. It's not years and years of psychoanalysis trying to track back where you got these wrong feelings or these bad feelings. It's not trying to get a group who will treat you nice and will treat you right. It's not that, loved ones! It's what the Bible says: you get your heart cleansed by faith, through the Holy Spirit. Faith is belief plus obedience.

When you were born of God, when the Holy Spirit acted upon you and made you aware of Jesus, and made you aware of God and of the realities of Heaven, you know what you did: obedience for you was repentance, it was turning from the things that were wrong in your life, it was stopping them, stopping them there. And then it was believing that Jesus had died for you and God was willing to forgive you. Now, it's exactly the same for a cleansed heart. It's faith -- belief plus obedience -- except that the obedience in this situation is consecration. Not repentance -- not turning away from the things that are wrong, but giving everything in your life to God, consecrating it wholly and absolutely in complete and full surrender, right from the top of your head to your feet. Right the whole way down to the deepest part of your heart.

It's giving it all to God and saying: "Lord, I want the Holy Spirit to come in and to rule my heart and to do what He wants. I want Him to make His wishes my wishes; I want His will to be my will. I don't want to even think a thought or turn an eye where He doesn't want to do it. I want to give myself wholly to you, Holy Spirit. You take over this whole being of mine and even the thoughts that I think are harmless, if you say I have not to think them, I won't think them." It's full consecration, loved ones. That's such a deep thing because you remember what the Bible said in Genesis? It said that the heart of man is deceitfully wicked above all things. And so it is with your heart. You know the garbage that comes out of there, you know the poison that it is capable of,

you know how it spews it up and you wonder "where did that come from?" Then we like to excuse ourselves, you know: "oh well, like you said, Pastor, it's just something coming in from outside", -- except we know fine well this stuff is coming up like a fountain. This isn't stuff that's coming in from outside, this stuff comes up repeatedly in our lives.

Loved ones, your heart is so deceitful that it is actually an enemy of God. That what's Romans 8:7 says: "The flesh is enmity against God, it is not subject to God's law, neither indeed can it be." Loved ones, you keep thinking your heart is just a little astray. That's it! That's the error you make! You keep thinking, "Oh well, Pastor, it's just a little in the bottom." Loved ones, that's bluff! While it has that little in the bottom to spread throughout the whole life anytime it cares to. The heart is deceitfully wicked above all things! It will continue to deceive you and make you think, "Put up with me, put up with me, it's only a little bit of wrong, that won't do you any real harm." Loved ones, it's poison! The Bible says it's enmity against God, it is not subject to God's law and indeed it cannot be. Wouldn't you testify to that? Wouldn't you testify that when you lose your temper, you feel "there's something insane inside me, I can't control it, I can't control it! It's like another person inside me." And that's what God's Word says: It's not subject to God's law, neither indeed can it be.

Loved ones, the first step in getting rid of it is consecrating your whole life absolutely to God and giving Him the right to run every part of it, the innermost part of your being. Do you keep that private spot for yourself? Do you? I mean, that's what I did. I kept a private place right inside, which none of you knew about and nobody else knew about and I kept that for myself. Even from God, that was a place where I could do what I wanted to do. Have you a place like that? That's your unclean heart, and consecration is opening even that up to God and saying: "Lord, I give what seems to be my very self. I give to you my very self, my deepest place, the place where I alone know, I give that to you, Lord, I consecrate that to you, for you to rule as you please. Run it like a cathedral if you want, run it like a nunnery if you want, run it like a monastery if you want, run it like the purest thing in the whole universe if you want. Lord, I consecrate it to you."

That's the obedience. And then the belief is BELIEVE that all of that old heart of yours was crucified with Christ as it was. The old heart was crucified with Christ and He has already given you His clean and pure heart. In other words, faith -- like that! -- springs up in your heart, the moment you've consecrated everything to Jesus. That's how, loved ones! And then the Holy Spirit comes in and cleanses your heart by your faith and keeps it cleansed as you continue to have faith that you were crucified with Christ and as you continue to submit to the Holy Spirit -- and it's a miracle, it's a miracle! And it outdoes all the silly books -- and all the psychological games we're going through -- and it deals with the heart of things and instead of trying to excuse your anger or justify it or justify your criticism, your sarcasm or your jealousy or trying to justify the things that you know are sin, but you try to make them out to be personality traits -- instead of justifying them, you find they don't even rise in your heart. That's what a clean heart means.

And honestly, you know, you may want to push me on this, you may want to say "brother, don't you mean that those things still come up, but you have more power to suppress them?" No, no, no... No! I don't care if you get me down here and you kick me to death, I'll still say "no, no!" It is not suppression, it is not repression. That's the old game that we all have been involved in. It is cleaning, cleansing - that's the word that the Bible uses. "He cleansed their hearts by faith" -- the Holy Spirit was given to them and God cleansed their hearts by faith. That means wash the stuff right out, so that it's clean, washed it right out! Didn't hold it down corked so that it couldn't

get out but cleansed it right out, washed it out, so that your heart is clean. So that at last, there's nothing coming up from inside, but beauty and love and purity. Can you then see it's your own fault then if you sin? I mean you're just dumb if you sin then. It's just your own fault! But you know the situation before that. You feel "well, it's hardly even my fault", but it is still your fault, but you feel "I can't help it, I can't help it, it's coming up from inside." But, loved ones, the full New Covenant that we have available to us is that God will cleanse our hearts.

You've got a clean conscience? Do you want a clean heart? Because the New Covenant is a clean conscience and a clean heart. Loved ones, will you begin to ask God to show you where you stand in regard to this? And I'll try as He gives me grace to explain it more, but would you begin to ask God to show you where you stand? And is there something rising up inside you that doesn't like this? Is there? Is there something inside you that's saying "Oh no, that's not true, it's not true, it can't be, nobody can be like that!" That's your unclean heart! And that unclean heart can take you all the way down to hell, if you don't allow God to deal with it, as He promised. So, be prepared for it and be prepared for opposition inside you. There will be plenty of opposition because the enemy is within you, even though Jesus is also there -- the enemy is within you -- and deal with him and I would say deal with him according to this dear Word. Read Acts 15:9 and say, "now, does it mean that? Does it mean that God can cleanse my heart by faith? Does it mean that there is a miracle than can happen inside me that can clean me out?" And that's what it means, loved ones.

Let us pray. Dear Father, we realize that we've made all kinds of excuses for ourselves over the years. What harm does a little bit of gossip do, little bit of criticism? Lord, we've always tried to justify it, as somebody needs to put things right, but Lord, we see there is only one who's responsible for conviction of sins and that's the Holy Spirit and the leaders that He appoints and anoints to use for that. So Lord, we would stop excusing ourselves. Lord, we've often got used to the low level of holiness and obedience that is present in so many of our churches and our society and we've excused ourselves and said as long as we don't sin to do something wrong on the outside, we are alright. But Lord, we know that it's this stuff in the inside that causes us the pain and the shame in your presence and Lord it's this stuff that rises from our unclean hearts that makes it so difficult to obey you even outwardly at times.

So, Father, we ask now, that by your Holy Spirit, you will come, dear Holy Spirit and begin to counsel us. We need your counseling. No other person knows us as you do. We ask you to be the Counselor and to reveal to us the depths of our unclean heart and take us to the very bottom of that heart. Take us down to the very end of all the sour spoiled stuff and then, Holy Spirit, enable us to give that all over to you and allow you to take up your residence there permanently. We apologize for so often expelling you, when we wanted to do something that we wanted to do. Holy Spirit, we want to come to the place where this is your home and you never need to be expelled, because nothing dirty is ever done there. So, dear Holy Spirit, we ask you to help each one of us these coming weeks to come to a place of full and absolute consecration where we give not only our outward life, but we give our inward heart to you, for your rule and for your leadership.

And now the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.