



“For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do his good pleasure,” Philippians 2:13.

The True Basis of Character

Lesson Aim: to gain an appreciation of the real source of Christian character—the regenerate heart.

L509. Date: April 1964. **Text:** Matthew 15:10-20; II Corinthians 5:16-17.
Topic: Character: Of Believers; Ethics.

INTRODUCTION — Today a series of thirteen lessons in the New Testament is begun. They will follow the Quarterly Theme, “Personal Christian Ethics.” “Ethics” has to do with standards of conduct and moral judgment. The ethical thing is the thing which ought to be. Therefore, this quarter of study aims: “To review the teachings of the Epistles (of Paul) regarding the specific personal duties of the believer.”

This study is concerned, however, with more than external deeds. The real basis of conduct is the heart. God's Word admonishes, **“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life,”** Proverbs 4:24. A man what he is in external conduct because of the condition of his heart. Jesus said, **“... out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things,”** Matthew 12:34-35. Therefore, any study of ethical standards must begin with an investigation of what a man is in his heart.

Today's lesson aims “to gain an appreciation of the real source of Christian character—the heart.” Since it is utterly impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6), a regenerate heart is an absolute necessity for acceptable service to Him. The lesson comments that follow will prove this proposition by examining the unregenerate heart and the regenerate heart as the basis for true character.

EXPOSITION

I. THE UNREGENERATE HEART, Matthew 15:10-20.

1. Deeds prompted by the unregenerate heart defile, rather than cleanse, a man, verses 10-11, 15-18. In New Testament times the Jews placed great emphasis upon the external rituals of the law—washing hands; observing ceremonies, etc.—while neglecting the weightier matters of judgment, mercy, and faith, Matthew 23:23. Therefore, they accused Jesus' disciples of transgressing the tradition of the elders by eating without washing their hands.

Jesus does not defend uncleanness in His reply. He rather points out that there is a defilement which is much worse than breaking religious traditions. If one should eat a speck of dirt by eating an apple as he walked along the road, it would cause no real damage to him. On the other hand, the person who substituted the traditions of men in the place of the commandments of God was guilty of a most serious error.

From the days of the prophet Ezekiel to the time of Jesus (fully six centuries), the Jews had taught for doctrines the commandments of men, verses 8-9; cp. Ezekiel 33:31. This unwarranted substitution had resulted in the spiritual degeneration of the nation. It had blinded the people's eyes so that they did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. It had brought neglect of higher ethical principles and substituted rituals in their places. Therefore, the Pharisees who held the traditions of the fathers of supreme authority and condemned Jesus' disciples of eating with unwashed hands were revealing the very ethical depravity which they attributed to the disciples.

This demonstrates how the words of one who knows not Jesus condemns himself. It further shows that the motivations, conversations, and conduct guided by an unregenerate heart defiles rather than cleanses.

“Those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man,” verse 18.

2. The unregenerate heart leads on to destruction, verses 12-13. The disciples knew the Pharisees were people of great influence. They thought surely Jesus would be concerned that He had offended them by His teaching. His answer shows Jesus regarded not the persons of men but was concerned only with the truth of God.

“Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up,” verse 13. God did not plant various religious sects in the world. Phariseeism, Sadduceeism, and the rest, were not the true vines planted of God. They were vines cultivated by men's hands. All movements marked by

self-seeking and divisive party spirit arise from unbelief in Him who is the true Head of the true body.

There is no need for God's people to fear the opinions of men. More important is to please God. The time is coming when all who have joined the movements founded and cultivated by men will be overthrown, but he who does the will of the Heavenly Father abides forever, I John 2:17.

3. Men with an unregenerate heart lead others to destruction, verse 14. **“The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes,”** Psalm 19:8b. This means those who know the commandment of the Lord have enlightened (seeing) eyes while those who know it not have darkened (blinded) eyes. It was natural, therefore, that the teacher of the Law (called rabbi) came to be called “the leader of the blind,” Romans 2:17-20. Jesus, on the other hand, said those who substituted the traditions of the fathers for the commandments of God were themselves blind, even though they tried to lead other blind ones. Most serious of all, the Pharisees of whom Jesus spoke were blind because they had chosen to be so, John 13:15. They were blind even though they insisted that they could see according to God's law, John 9:41.

Concerning those who purposefully turn from God's Word to tradition, Jesus said, “Have no fellowship with them, for they are blind leaders of the blind. They are blind by choice and are leading others who have been blinded by them by choice. They are headed for a fall but are unwilling to receive guidance in the right way.” How terribly tragic that today, as much as in Jesus' day, multitudes who call themselves the people of God are following the traditions of some religious hierarchy rather than the precious Word of God. They are headed for a fall but are so entranced with doctrines of prayers to saints, purgatory, and priest-craft that they will not listen to the truth. The fall is surly coming for them. How tragic!

Those following false teachers will fall just as their blind teachers fall. They will have no excuse before God. David Dickson has written, “None should follow any man, but as that man doth follow the Lord, the blind guide and the blind follower shall both perish, if they hold on in their wrong way.” Oh, that we would save some by directing them to Jesus!

4. The unregenerate heart never grows purer of itself, but only produces more uncleanness, verses 19-20. Corruption can only produce more corruption. When once one has surrendered to the traditions of men, he can expect to be led farther and farther from the pure truth of God. The farther he goes from God's truth the less serious will sin appear.

The heart of man is either redeemed by blood of Christ or it is depraved—regenerate or unregenerate. From the unregenerate (depraved,

unredeemed) heart can come only that which exalts man and ignores the truth of God. Therefore, Jesus said such a heart produced evil thoughts, murderers, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies, etc. These are much more serious than some mere defilement of a ritual of tradition. So Jesus concludes, **“These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man,”** verse 20.

How can anyone expect the unregenerate heart, which is capable of producing only the evil mentioned above, to be the source of true Christian character? Indeed, it cannot produce an ethical standard higher than its own nature. This is why the true basis for Christian character must lie in a regenerated heart.

II. THE REGENERATE HEART, II Corinthians 5:14-17.

1. The heart is regenerated through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, verse 14. The very heart of the Gospel message is, “One died for all.” Paul develops this theme in Romans 5:15, observing that as men share in the consequences of sin because of the offence of one man (the first Adam), so also men share in the gift of God's grace by the sacrifice of one Man (the second Adam, Jesus Christ).

Mankind stood at enmity with God as a result of sin. Such was the condition of their carnal mind that it was impossible of reconciliation to God, Romans 8:7-8. Yet, Paul declares that it is possible to have peace with God (Romans 5:1), indeed, a peace so amazing that it passes understanding, Philippians 4:7. How is this change from enmity to peace effected?

Jesus has brought peace between God and man through the blood of His cross, Colossians 1:20. In response to personal faith, the repenting sinner is justified by Jesus' blood and saved from God's wrath through Him, Romans 5:9. Indeed, this is the only way reconciliation and peace could be obtained. **“... It is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul,”** Leviticus 17:11b, and **“... without shedding of blood is no remission,”** Hebrews 9:22b. It is in Jesus only that a man may receive “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace,” Ephesians 1:7.

The regenerated heart is available to all who will repent and trust Jesus as a personal Saviour. God is reliable and will faithfully forgive all sin and cleanse from all unrighteousness, I John 1:9. He only can release from sin, and offer of forgiveness is made to **“... every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation,”** Revelation 5:9.

It is impossible to please God without faith, Hebrews 11:6. Faith brings

redemption of the soul and peace with God, Romans 5:1. Therefore, a regenerated heart is absolutely essential to the kind of character which pleases God. Is your hope in Jesus today?

2. The regenerate heart delights to follow the example of Jesus, verses 15-16. The Christian is called to walk in the same manner of selfless service which Jesus lived, I Peter 2:21. This does not mean, however, that Jesus becomes our example in that we seek to imitate Him in daily living. The Christian life is not an imitation of Jesus but a “participation in the life of Jesus. Galatians 2:20 points out that believers are crucified in Jesus’ death, nevertheless they live, Yet, it is not their own life which they live but the risen Christ lives within them. The Christian's life is actually the life of Christ! Being resurrected from spiritual death, the believer shares the life of the risen and ever-living Christ, Colossians 1:13.

Living the life of Jesus Christ is no dull and tiresome experience. Failure and fruitlessness come to believers only when they have not yet realized that their life is Christ. Once this blessed fact is a reality, the believer goes on from victory in Christian experience for he depends upon the fullness and power of the indwelling Lord. J. Hudson Taylor, famous missionary to the Orient in years past, said concerning this truth, “I am no longer anxious about anything.”

Here are two men. Each one has been challenged to a life of high ethical ideals built upon pure and true character. One man is a Christian; the other is morally good but an unbeliever. Do these men have equal opportunity to live according to their high standard? Absolutely not. One man depends entirely upon himself. The other man simply submits himself to Christ and lets the Lord Jesus live His own life out through him. **“For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure,”** Philippians 2:13.

Those in whom the life of Christ is manifest will not live for their own interests. They will live for Jesus and find that the delight of their hearts. This is the reasonable response expected to the sacrifice of Jesus, verse 15.

3. The regenerate heart is made so by a new creation in Jesus, verse 17. *“Behold, I make all things new,”* Revelation 21:5b. This is God's avowed purpose. The first creation was spoiled by sin and will pass away in a great exhibition of God's judgment, II Peter 3:10-12. Then a new creation will come into existence and therein only righteousness will enter. In making all things new, God begins by making men to be new persons. This new creation of mankind is called conversion or salvation.

The new creation in Jesus is the work of the Holy Spirit, Ezekiel 36:26. Man is unable to perform this miracle of redemption upon himself or upon

another, John 1:13. The renewing work of the Holy Spirit is essential to salvation (Titus 3:5) and is performed in response to faith in the heart, I John 5:1. Works of the flesh are useless here.

A great change accompanies salvation; believers **“have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him,”** Colossians 3:10. For the man who is in Christ Jesus, the old order of life is passed away. All his interests become new. He no longer lives; Christ lives in him. Under such circumstances the rituals of the flesh (such as Jewish circumcision) mean nothing. The matter of utmost importance is the new creation in Christ Jesus, Galatians 6:15.

CONCLUSION—A certain Oriental merchant had much business dealing with Occidentals from Christian lands. He soon learned a way to discover whether the customer was trustworthy. He would leave the purchaser in a room with a copy of the Bible and watch him unobserved. If the purchaser picked up the Bible, handled it tenderly and fell to reading it, this was a sign he could be trusted. If he tossed it aside with a sneer it was a sign he could not be trusted. Thus did the Oriental respect the character of the man who loves God’s word and is truly a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Just as salvation is essential to a true and pure character, so is the instruction of Holy Scriptures essential to proper human conduct. Next Sunday’s lesson will increase our appreciation of the inspired Scriptures as God’s standard of human conduct.

Questions

1. Why did the Jews put such emphasis on washing the hands before meals?
2. What was Jesus’ attitude toward “the tradition of the fathers”?
3. Why was a rabbi called “the leader of the blind”?
4. How did Jesus classify the Pharisees as leaders?
5. How is the heart regenerated?
6. What does Galatians 2:20 mean to you?
7. In what sense is a man in Christ a “new creation”?