



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 14TH PENTECOST

MARK 7:14-23

AUGUST 28, 2021

"I DON'T KNOW WHERE THIS CALF CAME FROM ... HONEST!"

In the early 20th century Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr coined the phrase "easy conscience" to describe modern folks. Dr. Niebuhr said modern folks concede they occasionally stumble in their morals – after all nobody's perfect, but when we do, we often insist that said behavior couldn't be helped. Bad circumstance forced upon us bad choices – the world needs cleaning up and until it is we have to do what we have to do. In the end, we flip the narrative and instead of being perpetrators we frame ourselves as victims. Can you imagine such a thing?!

If you think Dr. Niebuhr out to lunch in his observation, consider Exodus 32:19-24. Moses has just come down the mountain of the Lord with tablets of stone upon which were written commands intended to cement God's relationship with Israel and provide for a cohesive, benevolent society within Israel - a covenant which began "*you shall have no other gods before me.*" Yet upon his arrival Moses gazed in dismay at a golden calf elevated by singing throngs. He turned to his brother Aaron and said, "what happened?" Aaron said "*you were delayed...so the people told me to make them gods...you know how these people are? I said, "bring me some of your gold jewelry...I threw it in the fire and out popped this golden calf."* Go ahead read it – that's what it says! I tossed in some gold and lo and behold...!

Who would believe a bunch of bull like that? Yet how many times have you rehearsed that scenario? Congratulations if it's been more than 48 hours! Hardly a summer passed in my youth that a window on our garage wasn't broken by an errant baseball, though for the life of me I told mom and dad, I had no clue how it happened – David and Billy Kirkoff the neighbor kids probably! To be human is to create space between ourselves and our actions and so maintain an "easy conscience". But sin is a power over us - if the Bible is to be our guide at least. Folks who prefer an "easy conscience" Niebuhr said, wince at that idea – and with it any need of a redeemer. Their thinking would line up nicely with German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who said, "*forgiveness of sin in an imaginary solution to an imaginary problem.*"

'All I did was throw some gold into the fire – who knew...' Our lesson today from Mark continues a discussion between Jesus and certain Jewish leaders, and it seems to be religious minutia – food laws. Who cares? Prior to this Jesus debated same said leaders about traditions they themselves had conjured that interfered with God's commands, but not now – these food laws came from God! Leviticus 11 is your reference if your interested – God determined what culinary restrictions Israel would live under. These food laws were part of what the Jewish people regarded as their "holiness code" – because most of the injunctions about prohibited behaviors were punctuated by God saying, "*Be holy, as I am holy!*" Ergo...for Jews no dining on pigs...that one most of us have heard about...but also no eels, vultures, owls, insects (except grasshoppers and katydids) and for gosh sakes no creepy crawly things – lizards and above all snakes!

Save for the occasional urge for a BLT or ham sandwich I would find nothing in the food laws I couldn't keep! But what were these dietary restrictions intended for? Why did God care about what his people ate? These food laws were part of a complex array of restrictions on food, worship practices, sexual mores, treatment of skin diseases and even household mildew all punctuated by the command "*Be holy as I am holy.*" This Old Testament tapestry of moral, cultural and cultic guidance was intended to "*set apart Israel as an uncommon*" nation." The code wove together civic, cultic and moral laws that are difficult to untangle.

In our lesson today the most common phrase is “defile” and that’s freighted religious language – sometimes translated as “unclean” from the frequent use of that term in Leviticus, but which also can mean “to make common.” Read that way, our Lord is saying there are things that if done would no longer us “uncommon” people – in other words godly people.

Those things no longer include diet (or for those familiar with Leviticus - the fabric of our clothes or the way we plant gardens.) It does still include commands to remember the sabbath, abstain from sexual relations outside of marriage and pursue justice in legal matters just for example – cultic, moral and civic law intermingled in one holiness tapestry that our Lord was quick and decisive to affirm to his listeners. The food provisions were the easy entry into obedience to God. If you couldn’t keep those, even if you thought them unnecessary, how would you keep the sabbath command, or the command not to defraud, or the command, in matters of sex, to keep yourselves pure? Jesus declared all foods clean – one can eat without becoming “defiled” – there is no harm in being “common” in this regard. But dietary laws were matters which always involved things external to us and particularly our souls – Jesus knew that, and so should we.

But our Lord, in teaching about sin dives deep into “internals, and gives no room for the adoption of an “easy conscience”. Sin is a power over and in us evidenced by our Lord’s summary and ratification of virtually all of Leviticus and its holiness provisions. Go over the list and ask yourselves which ones describe your “inners.” Who of us can say that we’ve spoken harshly or slanderously of another individual only to say or think “they had it coming?” Who of us can say we’ve not invoked our freedom to enjoy the resources at our disposal to the diminishment if not exclusion of meeting a pressing human need? Who of us can say that our carefully constructed and monitored external character, even if inspired by faith, does not at the same time mask the sins of envy, malice, sexual immorality or arrogance – that is, pride of self? Who of us?

Our Lord’s gospel allows no room for an “easy conscience.” Our enemy Satan will eagerly call us legalists if we dare strive for holiness or false Christians and moral failures when we don’t. But then, he doesn’t get to name us does he –Jesus does. It does no good to try to create space between us and our sin – to opine “*all I did was take what the world offered...how did I know it would become another god to me.*” Our Lord will have none of it.

An easy conscience believes there can be found a law it can keep – usually something it can live with. An honest conscience – a Christian one, knows from plenty of personal history laws can’t be kept. It’s looks for its holiness in Jesus and so longs to be kept by Christ. And kept it will be. AMEN