Christ at the Center

On the Heart That Was Far From God, and the One That Is Made New

Rob Massie

Rob Massie Sermon Collection, Volume 3: The Upside-Down Kingdom, Chapter 6

Sermon preached July 21, 2024

Trust, and the Ebb and Flow

The Scriptures we have been hearing this morning (particularly Psalm 56, which one of the brothers read aloud) call us all to one fundamental posture: *trust God*. And another voice in the service has been showing us what that trust looks like *retained* by God and *transferred* to his Son. The song we have been singing, *for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life* (John 3:16), names exactly that transfer. *The suffering of the Son becomes the victory and the salvation of the world.*

And somehow, in trusting, when Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, he said, *Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me* (Matthew 26:39). He was *resisting* in that moment, not refusing, but registering the cost. And in our own moments of resistance, when the ups and downs of life come at us (the uncertainties of a child's illness, the daily fits and starts of raising children, the watch-from-the-cradle-to-the-grave that mothers know better than anyone) we might think our suffering is for us alone, for our families alone. *But our suffering is for something greater.* The world takes note. We do not always understand how this ripples outward. But we know it does. We know that the graceful behaviors and actions of people who suffer in faith create an environment in which even our enemies are eventually drawn in.

Recall who is at the foot of the cross when Jesus dies. Jesus has just said *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do* (Luke 23:34). He breathes his last. And the next voice we hear is the voice of *the Roman centurion*, the very executioner of the proceedings, who says: *Truly this was the Son of God* (Matthew 27:54). *The forgiveness of the One who suffered, spoken in the moment of his suffering, converted the enemy who killed him*. That is the pattern. The suffering of the Son becomes the conversion of the world. And our smaller sufferings, walked through with grace, participate, in some hidden but real way, in the same outflow.

It's Okay to Feel Forsaken

And let me say something to anyone reading this in a season of disconnection from God. *It is okay to feel forsaken.* Jesus himself, on the cross, cried out:

"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46).

He is quoting Psalm 22: the great psalm of dereliction that nevertheless turns, by its end, into a psalm of vindication. So when you find yourself in that psalm's territory, *you are in the company of the Lord himself*. He has been there. He spoke the words. He did not pretend the cup was sweet when it was bitter. *He did not call evil good.* He did not perform a counterfeit serenity. He *named* the forsaken-ness, and he *spoke it to the Father*, and the Father did not withdraw.

Psalm 56 shows the same ebb and flow:

> Be merciful to me, O God, for man would swallow me up; fighting all day he oppresses me . . . Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God (I will praise His word), in God I have put my trust; I will not fear. What can flesh do to me? (Psalm 56:1, 3–4)

Look at that movement. *Be merciful, man would swallow me up.* That is the dark side of the ebb. *Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You.* That is the return. *I will not fear.* That is the

resolution. *And then a few verses later the same psalm cycles back through it again*. The ebb-and-flow is not a sign of immature faith. *It is what real faith looks like in a real life.* The trust is reasserted again and again, not because it is precarious, but because the circumstances keep coming. Life keeps presenting fresh occasions to trust. *And God has asked us to trust him.* Not in a single resolved moment, but as a returning posture across decades.

Christ at the Center

So what holds the trust together across the ebbs? *Christ at the center.* That is the simplest way I can say it. *Jesus at the center of our lives.*

And here is where I want to lay down what I think is one of the most subtle and damaging breakdowns in the contemporary church. *Often we have put righteousness at the center of our lives instead of Christ.* It sounds spiritual. It sounds biblical. *And it isn't.* The pursuit of righteousness, which begins well and good, often becomes an external thing rather than an intrinsic thing. It becomes a list of things to do and not do, rather than a change of heart. And before long, the pursuit of righteousness becomes a pursuit of *appearing* righteous, which is the very thing the scribes and Pharisees were doing in Matthew 15.

One sister this morning, in the middle of significant family pressure (uncertainty about a relative's health, the ordinary stresses of raising children, the sense of inadequacy that comes from teaching Sunday school week after week) could have put on a *false righteousness*. She could have shown up looking composed, performing the part. *That* is what the scribes and Pharisees were good at. They knew how to practice their externals. But what she actually did was the opposite. She acted out *trust*. She asked her husband to come forward for prayer with her. She let her need be visible. And by doing so, *she moved everyone in the room*. The Pharisees

never moved anyone. They impressed people. They did not move them. Because performance does not move hearts. *Trust does.*

The Pharisees Come Down From Jerusalem

Now look at how Matthew 15 begins:

"Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, 'Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread'" (Matthew 15:1–2).

Notice the geography. *From Jerusalem.* These are not the local Galilean Pharisees. These are the *Jerusalem* delegation, sent down from the capital to investigate the rabbi who has been gathering crowds in the north. The Galilean Pharisees may have been intrigued; the Jerusalem Pharisees have come down to *correct*. And they begin with a question about tradition.

Now, what *is* the tradition they are invoking? *Washing hands before eating bread* was not a Mosaic command. It was a *rabbinic tradition*, what the rabbis called *the tradition of the elders*, that had grown up around the Torah as a *protective fence*. The logic of fence-building was real, and in its place it was sometimes useful. The reasoning went like this: Here is the cliff of the actual command. Let us build a fence well back from the cliff, and call obedience to the fence the same as obedience to the cliff. That way no one falls. It was the safety culture of first-century rabbinic Judaism.

The Pharisees have come to Jesus with a fence-violation complaint. *Your disciples are crossing the fence.* They are not even claiming Jesus' disciples are breaking *Torah*; they are claiming the disciples are breaking *the rabbinic fence around Torah*. Notice how thin their case is. They cannot point to actual disobedience to a divine command. *They can only point to disobedience to a human fence around the command.*

And Jesus does not respond to the fence complaint. He responds with a counter-complaint:

> He answered and said to them, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God,” then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.” (Matthew 15:3–6)

This is *brutal*. Jesus catches them in a precise legal-ethical maneuver. Their tradition was that a person could declare any portion of their assets *Corban*, meaning *consecrated as a gift to God*. The King James translates the phrase as *it is a gift*, but the underlying word is *Corban* (Hebrew *qorban*, dedication). Once an asset was declared Corban, it became unavailable for any other use. *You could not retract it.*

And what the Pharisees had effectively legalized was this: a son could declare to his aged parents, ‘whatever I might have used to support you in your old age, that’s been dedicated as a gift to God. I can’t help you. Sorry.’ The son did not necessarily have to give the money to the temple immediately. He could simply declare it Corban and retain the use of it himself until some later date. The Corban declaration was a legal mechanism for evading the responsibility to care for aging parents under cover of religious dedication. It was, to use the language of a different era, a tax shelter dressed up as piety.

And Jesus’ diagnosis is razor-sharp. *You have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.* The actual Torah command in Exodus 20:12, *honor your father and your mother*, and the protective command in Exodus 21:17, *whoever curses his father or his mother*

shall surely be put to death, were being *practically suspended* by the Corban tradition. The fence had grown up around the command and then *swallowed* the command. The protective tradition had become the very thing that violated what it was protecting.

What "Honor Your Father and Mother" Actually Means

Let me pause here, because this commandment is widely misunderstood in evangelical circles in our day. *Honor your father and mother* was not given as a child-rearing command for three-year-olds. The Torah law was given to adult Israelites who would, in time, have aging parents in their household. *The commandment is principally about adult children caring for parents who can no longer care for themselves.*

In ancient Israel there was no state-funded retirement. There were no nursing homes. There were no government pensions. *When your father and mother grew old, they came to your house, and you took them in.* You fed them. You bathed them when they could no longer bathe themselves. You sat by their beds when their health failed. *That* is what *honor your father and mother* meant, in its original concrete sense. The commandment was an *intergenerational care commitment* binding the adult-child generation to the elder generation.

And in our day, the commandment has sometimes been *reinterpreted* in ways the text does not warrant. I was for many years part of the homeschool movement, and at one point in that movement I watched the *honor your father and mother* commandment ratcheted up into something it was never meant to be. We will tell you what to read. We will tell you what to study. We will tell you whom you can date. We will continue to approve or veto your spousal choice well into your thirties. Articles began circulating in the movement I was part of, written by people I followed at the time, about what some came to call the *cloistered homeschool family*. Men and women in their thirties and forties (*adults*, by any normal reckoning) still waiting for

parental approval of the most basic life decisions. *That is not what honor your father and mother means.* That is a misuse of the commandment in the direction of perpetual control.

What the commandment *actually* means is this: *when your parents had need, when you were small, they were there for you. And when they have need, in their old age, you are there for them.* The flow goes both directions across the generations, and the command is principally about the adult child's responsibility to the aging parent. *Corban*, the Pharisees' tax shelter, violated exactly that. The contemporary cloistered-family tradition violates it in a different direction. *Both* are examples of human tradition layering on top of divine commandment in a way that *empties* the commandment of its original substance.

The Heart That Was Far

> And then Jesus quotes Isaiah:
>
> Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' (Matthew 15:7–9, quoting Isaiah 29:13)

Their heart is far from Me. That is the diagnosis. The mouth is close. The lips are close. The performance is close. *The heart is far.* And the worship that flows from a far-away heart is *in vain*, not because the words are wrong, but because the words are *disconnected* from the place they are supposed to come from.

This is one of the things Jesus is going to return to repeatedly across his ministry. In Matthew 7, at the close of the Sermon on the Mount:

> Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord,

> have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Matthew 7:21–23)

Lord, Lord. The mouth saying the right words. *I never knew you.* The relationship missing. And it is the *relationship missing* that finally disqualifies the *words being said*. The mouth alone cannot save us. Only the heart, in actual relationship with the Lord, can.

And this is the same pattern Jeremiah confronted in his day. The reformed temple under King Josiah had restored the worship of Yahweh, and the people had begun to chant, almost as a mantra, *the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord* (Jeremiah 7:4). They had the right words. They had the right building. They were performing the right rituals. *But Jeremiah saw through it.* The heart was far. The deception was that they had convinced themselves the externals could carry weight the internals had refused. *The temple, the temple, the temple* will not save a far-away heart any more than *Lord, Lord, Lord* will. The form alone, without the substance, is *vain worship*.

The Bowl Cleaned From the Inside

Now follow how Jesus develops the same theme into Matthew 23. By the time he reaches the capital and confronts the same Pharisees on their own ground, he says:

> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. (Matthew 23:25–26)

First cleanse the inside. That is the gospel of Christ in miniature. The Pharisees were *expert* at cleaning the outside of the bowl. They had spent generations perfecting the techniques.

The cup glittered on the table. But inside: *extortion and self-indulgence*. The grime that mattered was the grime they were not even looking at.

And Jesus' principle is simple: *clean the inside, and the outside automatically becomes clean*. Pursue God, and righteousness will follow. Pursue righteousness *for its own sake*, and you will spend your life polishing the outside of a bowl whose inside is still full of the same patterns. *This is where the church has often failed.* We have watched people come into the kingdom and immediately gone to work on their externals. *Stop drinking. Stop smoking. Stop swearing. Get a haircut. Dress appropriately.* All of which may be entirely legitimate concerns at the appropriate time, but *none of which is the gospel*. The gospel is *cleanse the inside, and the outside will follow*. The gospel is *Christ at the center, not righteousness at the center*.

And what happens when we get the order wrong? We produce what we have been producing for generations. False conversions. Partial conversions. "I want to convert, but I can't do this righteousness" conversions. People come down to the altar wanting Christ, and we give them a list of behaviors to manage. They try. They cannot. They drift away. And we shake our heads at the back-slidden. We never told them the gospel. We told them a checklist. The righteousness of Christ is not born out of self-will and a myriad of commandments of men. It is born out of relationship with God Almighty and his Son Jesus Christ.

The Most People in the World

And I will say this. *Most of the people in the world who reject Christianity do not actually reject Jesus.* They reject the way Jesus has been represented to them by his people. They reject the system. They reject the externals. They reject the moralism. *They reject the bowl that was clean on the outside and full of self-indulgence on the inside, while preaching at them about*

their own externals. And in rejecting that system, they tell themselves they are rejecting Jesus, when often they have never met him.

If they could have seen the Jesus who *condescended himself* (who came down close to humanity, who walked the road to Jerusalem on a stake, who was condemned to death and forgave from the cross) they would have seen something else entirely. *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.* And the centurion's response: *Truly this was the Son of God.* The way God descended through his Son, the *manner* of the suffering, the forgiveness extended in the moment of greatest cost, *that* converts the world. The clean outside of the religious bowl does not.

It's What Comes Out of the Mouth

Jesus then turns from the Pharisees to the crowd:

"When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, 'Hear and understand: Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man'" (Matthew 15:10–11).

And the disciples come to him afterward and say:

> "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch." (Matthew 15:12–14)

Two things to notice here. First, the *every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted* line. Jesus is echoing his earlier parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13. The Father plants his crop. An enemy plants tares alongside. And the answer to the tares is *not to immediately uproot them by force* but to let them grow alongside until the harvest,

when the harvesters will sort it out. The Pharisaical fence-tradition is part of the tares. *Let it alone.* The Father will uproot in his own time. We are not commissioned to do the uprooting ourselves.

Second, *blind leaders of the blind*. This is the image Psalm 115 traces about idolatry: *those who make idols become like them; eyes that cannot see, ears that cannot hear, mouths that cannot speak* (cf. Psalm 115:4–8). What you worship, you become. The Pharisees had been worshiping their own tradition; the tradition had blinded them; and now they were leading others into the same blindness. And both *fall into a ditch*: what Revelation will later call *the pit*, the place of religious delusion. *Religious deception is a real spiritual hazard*, and Jesus says it as plainly here as he says it anywhere.

Out of the Heart

> Peter asks for the parable to be explained. Jesus answers:
>
> Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man. (Matthew 15:16–20)

Trace what Jesus does in that catalog. *Evil thoughts*: covetousness. *Murders*, the sixth commandment. *Adulteries*, the seventh. *Fornications*, the broader category of sexual immorality the Pharisees would have wanted to nuance their way around. *Thefts*, the eighth. *False witness*: the ninth. *Blasphemies*, the third, broadened. *Jesus is naming almost the entire second table of the Decalogue*, and locating the source of every violation in *the heart*.

And then he adds a category the rabbis would have wanted to argue about: fornications alongside adulteries, and blasphemies alongside false witness. He is anticipating the Pharisee's predictable next move, Yes, but you said adultery; what about this category? You said false witness; what about that?, and he is closing the loopholes before they can be opened. No more legal maneuvering. The heart is the problem.

This is exactly the diagnosis Jeremiah received from the Lord about why the new covenant would be necessary:

> Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . . . I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:31, 33)

Written on their hearts. Not on tablets of stone. Not in fences around the commands. *On the heart itself.* Because if the heart is the source of everything that defiles, then the heart is where the cleansing must occur. And the new covenant promises exactly that: a new heart, a heart of flesh in place of the heart of stone, the Spirit of God placed inside the human person, *the law inscribed on the inward parts* by the finger of God himself. *This is the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees*, not more rules, not more fences, but *a new heart in active relationship with the Lord*.

Holiness That Transmits Outward

And now look at what this changes about how we live. The Pharisaical fear was that *contact with the unclean defiled the clean*. Touch the corpse: you become unclean. Eat with the Gentile: you become unclean. Associate with the publican: you become unclean. *Cleanness was understood as fragile*; uncleanness was understood as contagious.

> The prophet Haggai had asked exactly this question to the priests:
>
> "If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?" Then the priests answered and said, "No." And Haggai said, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" So the priests answered and said, "It shall be unclean." (Haggai 2:12–13)

Read the priests' answer carefully. *Holiness does not transmit by contact. Uncleanness does.* That was the old-covenant logic. The clean is fragile; the unclean is contagious. Holiness has to be protected; impurity has to be contained.

But with Jesus, the logic is reversed. Everyone who touches the body of Jesus, the One who died and rose, *is not made unclean; they are made clean*. The leper Jesus touches does not contaminate Jesus; the leper is healed. The blood that flows from the woman with the issue does not defile Jesus when she touches his garment; she is restored. The dead daughter of Jairus does not defile Jesus when he takes her by the hand; she is raised. *The contagion has been reversed in the body of the Son of God.* What was once a one-way flow of impurity from the unclean to the clean has become a one-way flow of *holiness* from the Clean One to the unclean.

And this is why Jesus ate with publicans and sinners *and was not defiled*. The bowl of his presence was so radiantly clean on the inside that the externals could not contaminate it. *They were converted by their involvement with him*. The publicans became disciples. The sinners became saints. *The holiness of God is a holiness that transmits outward*, and that transmission is what Pentecost has commissioned the church to extend into the world.

But Watch Your Boundaries

Now I want to add a careful word, because the principle of *holiness transmits outward* can be misapplied. *Be very careful as you journey this road.* All of us are at different places on it. Christ calls all things clean, but he has also placed in each of us a heart that knows the boundaries each of us needs.

There are places I cannot go. There are people I cannot be with, not because they are unclean, but because their company would awaken in *me* an old pattern I have not yet been delivered from. There is music I cannot listen to, because the lyrics or the associations would carry me places I have no business going. There are things I cannot eat or drink, because of where they take me. *That may not be your story, but you have a story of your own.* The Spirit will tell you where your own fences need to be. The fences are no longer rabbinic and external; they are *interior,* written on your particular heart by the Spirit of the living God who knows your particular wiring.

Paul develops exactly this in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8: the *strong* who can eat anything and the *weak* who cannot, the *strong* who must not flaunt their freedom in a way that wounds the weak, the *weak* who must not condemn the strong's freedom. Both are members of the same body. Both are walking different stretches of the same road. *Jesus did not come into the world to give us a new set of commandments. He came into the world to give us a new spirit.* And the new spirit comes with its own internal compass, calibrated for the particular journey each of us is on.

Breathe in, Breathe Out

Earlier this morning the sister who testified asked the congregation to breathe: *breathe in, breathe out*. Breathe in the life of God. Breathe out the negativity, the disease, the corruption, the anxiety. *Put on the new man. Put off the old.*

That is more than a contemplative exercise. *That is exactly what God did with Adam in the garden.* There was a lump of clay. Inert. Lifeless. Not yet animated. *And God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being* (Genesis 2:7). The breath of God animated the dust into a person. And every breath we have drawn since has, in some sense, been a continuation of that original breath.

And then look at how Ezekiel uses the same image. He receives a vision of *a foundling baby Israel*, abandoned in a field, kicked aside by her mother, gasping for breath. And the Lord stoops down and breathes into her:

"And when I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' Yes, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!'" (Ezekiel 16:6).

Live. Breathe. The infant Israel grows up. She is adorned. She becomes a beautiful woman. The breath of God in her was the difference between a discarded body in a field and a flourishing daughter of the King.

That is what God means to do in every one of us. We were each a slab of clay. Our parents shaped us. Our culture shaped us. The words spoken over us shaped us: sometimes for good, sometimes leaving us *misshapen* in places we are still discovering. And here, into this misshapen condition, *Jesus comes to breathe new life*. The breath of life that animated Adam in the garden is the same Spirit who, at Pentecost, came as *a rushing mighty wind* (Acts 2:2). *Same breath. Same life. Same animating presence.* And his commission has not changed. He breathed

Adam into a vocation, *tend and keep the garden* (Genesis 2:15). He has breathed us into a vocation too. *We are a planting, a garden of God. He has given us a task to work on it. Let's just be about it.*

Breathe in. Breathe out. Live. Remember the goodness of God toward you, and breathe it in. Remember the good people God has placed in your life, and breathe out a blessing on them. *Christ at the center.* That is the *more* the chapter has been asking for. That is the relationship that produces the righteousness no list of rules ever can. That is what the Pharisees were missing and what the disciples were given. *And it is what is still offered, today, to every reader of this page.*