Today’s Gospel (Mark 7:14-23) follows the scene where the Pharisees question Jesus regarding why his disciples don’t adhere to the ritual purifications prescribed by the Mosaic law. This is a legitimate question, as it’s hard to believe Jesus is the Jewish messiah if his disciples aren’t even good Jews. Jesus rebukes them for holding the traditions of men over the commandments of God, condemning them with Isaiah’s words: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” And here we get to the crux of the issue: God’s commandments are meant to lead us to Him. To follow them while simultaneously remaining far from Him is as backwards as things can get.

It actually reminds me of Valentine’s Day. I hate Valentine’s Day, which probably sounds awful, but to me a key ingredient of romance is spontaneity, responding to the value of my beloved, so the idea of a day designated to romance makes no sense. It turns “romance” into a no win scenario: if you don’t do anything with or for your loved one, you’re a callous jerk, and if you do, well then you’ve simply done what was expected. I should be motivated to honor my beloved because of my love for her, not because of social expectations. One can only wonder how many couples go through the motions of buying flowers or candy and going out to dinner, while never growing in their love or intimacy. Buying my wife flowers when it’s not expected shows that I’m thinking about her. Buying her flowers on Valentine’s Day could be a sign that I’m thinking about myself, and not wanting to get in trouble for not fulfilling an obligation.

It appears that this was the state of Jewish “religion” at the time of Jesus: follow the rules to show you’re a good Jew. Jesus’ disciples did not do this, and this is what the Pharisees questioned. This is why Jesus turns everything upside down in today’s passage. “Do you not see that whatever does into a person from outside cannot defile…it is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come from…” (Mark 7:18, 20). Jesus inverts what’s important: the state of the heart, not appearances or rule following. Clearly this was God’s intention all along, but the Jews had moved so far away from this ideal that a shake-up was needed. What God truly desires of us is not rule following, but a change of heart. He wants our hearts to desire Him, to long for Him.

As I’ve grown older I’ve come to the conclusion that the desire for human respect holds our society together. We allow someone go in front of us in line at the grocery store, or generally defer to others in public, out of a desire to not be thought badly of. While one could debate the degree to which even this fundamental level of civility still exists in our culture, it is clear that actions that should be based on humility are actually rooted in pride. We just want to be well thought of and respected, and so much of what we do is based on this.

So, should we simply stop being kind to strangers in public in order to fight this vain tendency? Of course not. But our hearts must be changed so that we act out of humility, and not out of pride (a real test of motivation is how you treat your family in the same situation, i.e., with someone whose love or respect we don’t feel a need to earn). Instead of not getting my wife flowers on Valentine’s Day because it’s expected, I should get her flowers on Valentine’s Day to express my love for her. The real irony is that not getting her flowers on Valentine’s Day would be motivated by a desire to not ***appear*** that I was only getting them for her because it’s Valentine’s Day.

Jesus Himself tells his followers to follow what the Pharisees teach, but not their example Matt 23:3). Later in the same chapter (v. 23), He scolds the Pharisees for tithing on herbs not prescribed the Law, while neglecting justice, mercy, and faith. We can infer that the point of tithing, and the Law in general, was to lead the Jews to justice, mercy, and faith. However, Jesus tells them, “these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.” Tithing on herbs that was not wrong, and it is not for this that Jesus rebukes them – in fact, it could have been a way to express a love for God that goes beyond what was prescribed in the Law, if their hearts were in the right place. We should try to outdo each other in service, but not so that we can remind each other that we did.

And now we get to the real issue at the root of this exchange with the Pharisees which seems to go on throughout the Gospels: rule following does not require a savior, and appearances only feed our pride. A change of heart, however, is not something that we can accomplish apart from God. “Fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly,” (Mark 7:22) these are the things that plague our hearts, and that we are powerless to overcome. Desiring a change of heart is necessary, but we don’t have the ability to make it happen. We need a savior. Rule following will only makes us good Jews. To reduce Christianity to rule following is to rob it of its power: “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23-24). Only Christ can reach down to our motivations and purify them. Only He can love us in a way that can transform the way that we love.

Isaiah 58:1-9

In this passage, God corrects the Israelites through the prophet Isaiah, like a father correcting and teaching a son. The topic: fasting. It is interesting that as Catholics, we seem to have reinvented many of the same bad habits that Jews had at the time of Jesus, habits that Jesus denounces under no uncertain terms. Fasting is not necessarily a Catholic practice – Christians of all denominations are familiar with fasting and engage in this practice to one degree or another. But Catholics seem to have the most well developed set of rules about fasting, if for no other reason that Catholic Church is universal, not just every parish for themselves as most Protestant churches operate.

In a culture of self-indulgence and the avoidance of anything uncomfortable or inconvenient, fasting is not popular. However, I would add that the way we practice fasting contributes to a perception that religion is primarily about guilt and superstition. We fast because we deserve nothing better, and if we punish ourselves before God does we can make Him listen to us. And this is precisely what the Israelites were doing at the time of Isaiah: “They ask me to declare is due them, pleased to gain access to God. ‘Why do we fast and you do not see it? Afflict ourselves, and you take no note of it?’” (v. 3). It seems that the Israelites are confused by the fact that they’re fasting but God is not listening to them. The explanation: “on your fast day you carry out your own pursuits, and drive all your laborers. Yes, your fast ends in quarreling and fighting, striking with the wicked claw.” (v. 4). It seems that the Israelites fail to understand the purpose of fasting. They go on with business as usual, including behavior that is obviously contrary to love, and believe that by their fasting they can make God listen to them. They want a remote control God who will grant they whatever they wish if they deprive and afflict themselves. For them, fasting is a merely external practice used to control events, like a rain dance.