# SERMON SERIES: A JOURNEY OF STONES

**“Hearts Of Stone”**

## *Luke 11:37-52*

(adapted from *Journey of Stones: A Sermon Series for Lent and Easter* by Steven Molin

CSS Publishing Company, 2002; pp. 29-32)

This morning we continue our Lenten sermon series entitled “A Journey Of Stones.” We’ve been using stones to symbolize our sins, and the first week we discussed whether Jesus is the true cornerstone of our lives, or if he is more like a Pet Rock to us. Last week our stones represented the words or attitudes that we’re ready to use against others—words of judgment and condemnation, attitudes of superiority or pride.

As we’ve said, Lent is a hard time in the life of the church and in the life of the Christian. It’s a time of personal and corporate evaluation, of confession, repentance and self-denial. It’s a difficult time when the journey is long and the messages are hard—not unlike the passion week of Jesus. It’s tempting to tune out and look ahead to springtime or Easter Sunday or even summer vacation. But once again we must focus on our sins, and the Savior who came to free us from them. Turn in your Bibles to our Scripture reading for today, Luke 11:37-52.

By this point in his ministry, Jesus was making his final journey to Jerusalem. Along the way he had one run-in after another with the religious leaders, who were desperately trying to pin something on him. After addressing a crowd with some hard words about their demand for a sign of his power and purpose, we read:

*37As Jesus was speaking, one of the Pharisees invited him home for a meal. So he went in and took his place at the table. 38His host was amazed to see that he sat down to eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony required by Jewish custom. 39Then the Lord said to him, “You Pharisees are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and wickedness! 40Fools! Didn’t God make the inside as well as the outside? 41So clean the inside by giving gifts to the poor, and you will be clean all over.*

*42“What sorrow awaits you Pharisees! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore justice and the love of God. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.*

*43“What sorrow awaits you Pharisees! For you love to sit in the seats of honor in the synagogues and receive respectful greetings as you walk in the marketplaces. 44Yes, what sorrow awaits you! For you are like hidden graves in a field. People walk over them without knowing the corruption they are stepping on.”*

*45“Teacher,” said an expert in religious law, “you have insulted us, too, in what you just said.”*

*46“Yes,” said Jesus, “what sorrow also awaits you experts in religious law! For you crush people with unbearable religious demands, and you never lift a finger to ease the burden. 47What sorrow awaits you! For you build monuments for the prophets your own ancestors killed long ago. 48But in fact, you stand as witnesses who agree with what your ancestors did. They killed the prophets, and you join in their crime by building the monuments! 49This is what God in his wisdom said about you:‘I will send prophets and apostles to them, but they will kill some and persecute the others.’*

*50“As a result, this generation will be held responsible for the murder of all God’s prophets from the creation of the world— 51from the murder of Abel to the murder of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, it will certainly be charged against this generation.*

*52“What sorrow awaits you experts in religious law! For you remove the key to knowledge from the people. You don’t enter the Kingdom yourselves, and you prevent others from entering.”*

The scribes and Pharisees were men of wealth and status, exerting an immense amount of power over the people. The Pharisees were religious purists who carefully observed every aspect of the law of Moses. Plus, they had established laws around the law—additional rules to keep from breaking the rules. ***By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had 613 laws they kept—and expected everyone else to keep. Of that number 365 were prohibitions.***

Being devoutly orthodox, the Pharisees always went a step or two farther than the law required. If the law called for a fast, the Pharisees began their fast before everyone else and kept at it long after everyone else was finished. And they made sure everybody knew it. That was another characteristic of the Pharisees: they portrayed themselves as better than the rank-and-file folks. As we said last week, the word ‘Pharisee’ means “men who separated themselves.” They refused to associate with the sinners around them and condemned anyone who was not as diligent and faithful as they were.

The scribes were associated with the Pharisees as a sort of legal attaché. They were responsible for such things as estate planning, and they kept thorough records of how laws should be observed. This gave them plenty of opportunity to craft loopholes that would benefit the religious elite. Here’s an example of one related to keeping the Sabbath holy:

***“To carry a burden [on the Sabbath] is forbidden. He who carries anything, whether it be in his right hand, or in his left hand…or on his shoulder is guilty. But he who carries anything on the back of his hand, or with his foot, or with his mouth, or with his elbow, or with his ear…or with his money bag turned upside down, or between his money bag and his shirt, or in the fold of his shirt…is not guilty, because he does not carry it in the usual way of carrying it.”*** That’s how the scribes and Pharisees observed and avoided the law of Moses. And they condemned anyone who didn’t do it their way.

One day Jesus went to eat dinner in the home of a well-known Pharisee. *So he went in and took his place at the table. 38His host was amazed to see that he sat down to eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony required by Jewish custom.*

Of course, it’s always good to wash one’s hands before eating. But what was happening here wasn’t simply an issue of proper hygiene. Hand washing was a ritual the Pharisees put in place to further separate themselves. And since Jesus was a prominent rabbi, they expected him to follow their traditions.

When Jesus was asked about his lack of support for the Pharisees’ tradition, we see one of the few instances in Scripture where Jesus lost his temper. “You guys take such delicate care to wash the outside—the hands—but meanwhile the inside—your hearts—remain filthy. You give one-tenth of everything: wheat, coins, even the tiniest herb. But you fail to love God and to treat people with justice and compassion. Shame on you!”

“You always take the very best seats in the synagogue—not because you want to see and learn—but so that everyone else can see you and praise you for how spiritual you are. Shame on you!”

“And another thing,” Jesus continued. “You tell people that if they touch a gravestone, even by accident, they will be unclean. And yet you Pharisees are a walking cemetery! Your faith is dead and you don’t even know it. You want everyone to be just like you because misery loves company. Shame on you!”

*45“Teacher,” said an expert in religious law, “you have insulted us, too, in what you just said.”* Jesus didn’t miss a beat. “Well, you’re just as bad. Shame on you, too! You make rigid rules for others to follow, but you invent ways so that you can avoid following them! Shame on you!”

“And you’ve made the holy words of God into a book of riddles and philosophical arguments that only confuses and confounds people. Yes, you scribes are just as guilty as your brother Pharisees. Shame on you all!”

The common thread here is that the religious leaders wanted to remain in control of others and wanted to perpetuate their influential lifestyles. They wanted to control who had access to God. They enjoyed deciding who obeyed the rules and who broke them. They wanted to preserve the religious institution the Jewish faith had become because it benefited them. A select handful used their influence, wealth, and status as a yardstick to measure others against—or as a club to thump those who threatened them.

We need to remember that Jesus was not anti-Pharisee. I’m sure Jesus admired the Pharisees for their dedication and commitment to God’s Word. What they were trying to do was noble: they wanted to faithfully honor God’s laws and they wanted the people to do the same. What upset Jesus was the religious smugness, legalism and hypocrisy they exuded. In their gallant pursuit of legal purity and obedience, they had been seduced by power and corrupted by sin.

We said last Sunday that if these events were played out today, we might likely be cast in the role of the Pharisees at times. We have to honestly ask ourselves: do we as “good church people” want to control access to God? Do we try—consciously or unconsciously—to define who obeys the rules and who breaks them? Are we guilty of trying to preserve our own personal preferences and comforts because that’s the way we like it?

There are a lot of churches today like that. A handful of people want to dominate the committees and control what does and does not happen in the church. ***I sat in an Administrative Board meeting in a previous appointment and one woman wanted to know why we’d increased our outreach budget from $1,500 to $5,000. She and her family loved to micromanage the church’s finances and they were against expenditures for outreach or the needy. Her family wanted to keep the money in the bank so they could boast about how much they had.***

***The same family’s Sunday school class pitched a fit when we did an Easter Sunday outreach event. We held a free breakfast for anyone in the community at 9:00 AM, an Easter egg hunt for the children at 10:00 AM, and Easter worship at 11:00 AM. The Sunday school class was upset because we cancelled Sunday school in order to do this outreach. Their hearts were not open to the movement of the Holy Spirit, nor were they interested in doing anything that did not directly benefit them. Their hearts were hardened.***

But just because we’re followers of Christ doesn’t mean we get to control what does and does not happen. We don’t get to decide who receives grace and who doesn’t. ***Author and speaker Tony Campolo once described the greatest criticism he ever received while speaking in a church. Standing before a large, well-dressed pious congregation, Campolo announced, “Tonight in West Africa, 6,000 people will die of starvation. And you don’t give a damn.”***

***The congregation gasped, but Campolo continued. “And do you know how I know that? It’s because right now you’re more concerned about the fact that I just said ‘damn’ in your pulpit than you are about 6,000 people who will die.”***

Campolo’s audience didn’t get it. Neither did some in one of my previous appointments. Neither did the scribes and Pharisees. On the contrary, they resented being scolded because their hearts were hardened. So they responded with ridicule and criticism and rejection. They didn’t want to admit their sinfulness, or surrender their preferences, or give up their control.

Once a heart has turned to stone it’s difficult to soften it again. It takes great humility to turn the heart around. Sometimes it takes a great tragedy. And sadly, sometimes people simply will not allow their hearts to be changed. ***Many a church has been devastated by a handful of people whose hearts have been hardened by one thing or another. They exert toxic levels of control and manipulation. That’s one of the reasons I wrote my book,* Bullied!*--to expose and confront some of the common ways in which churches are torpedoed by hardened hearts.***

This morning you hold in your hand another stone. It’s symbolic of your heart. If your heart is soft and receptive, open to what the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ wants to do in your life, then I encourage you to take your stone home with you. However, if your heart is hard for any reason—if it is hard toward another person or toward God, if it is hard toward the church or our denomination—I invite you to come forward and lay your stone on the altar.

Let us pray:

*Our Father in heaven, who rules over every physical and spiritual thing, we feel the weight of a small stone in our hand right now. That stone represents our heart. And we have to choose whether our heart is soft and yielding—willing to forgive and speak mercy, willing to do what you tell us without hesitation; or whether our heart is hardened in some way.*

*Father, we don’t want to be like the Pharisees with their holier-than-thou attitudes and condescending behaviors. We don’t want our hearts to be hardened. But sometimes, Abba, they become that way without us even realizing it. We let a comment or a slight or an old wound persist in our fantasies and memories, and little by little our heart becomes rigid and unmoving.*

*In this time, Abba, search out each of us as only you can do. Guided by the Holy Spirit, help us to honestly appraise the condition of our heart. If you tell us that our heart is soft and warm, willing and responsive, let us carry our stone home with gladness. But if you tell us that our heart is hardened in some way—toward someone or something—then let us carry our stone to the altar and leave it there, as a testimony of our sin and of your healing power. By the holy and revered name of Jesus Christ; amen.*