

Mark 7:1-23 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” 6 He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

9 Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! 10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ 11 But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)— 12 then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18 He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, 19 since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20 And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. 21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

## CLEAN HANDS

Cleanliness is next to godliness. Right?

That's what the Scribes and Pharisees seemed to think, and that's what my mother (and probably your mother too) taught you when you were just a child.

But, there's more to this story than clean hands and a warm heart. It's about the brewing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities.

And it's about the Kingdom of God that comes through the ministry of Jesus.

For many people true religion is about saying how and why we are different from everyone else. It is not about trying to bring people in.

Jesus' kingdom will be different. It will include everyone. It will be about bringing people in.

And that made Jesus a threat to many people.

I heard someone say this past week,

“We have to decide if we're going to be the kind of church that casts out heretics or the kind of church that seeks new converts.”

Jesus came down on the side of new converts. For Jesus faith was not about ritualistic restrictions. Faith was about seeking the lost sheep.

## CONTEXT

In order to understand this passage we have to consider the context. In chapter 6 of Mark's gospel Jesus feeds 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. Then Jesus tells the disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee while he takes time to pray.

But, on the Sea the disciples encounter a great storm. Jesus comes to them in their distress, walking on the water, and he calms the storm.

And yet the disciples are not encouraged by this miracle. Instead they are scared to death. Mark tells us that their fear was due to a lack of understanding and a lack of faith. In Mark 6:52 we read, "...for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened."

Eventually the disciples and Jesus make to the other side, a Gentile town called Gennesaret. And in that town Jesus continues to heal many. He concludes his mission to the Gentiles in chapter 8 of Mark's gospel with another miraculous feeding. This time he feeds 4,000 with seven loaves.

Do you see the connection? The miraculous feedings that are recorded in all the gospels prefigure the Lord's Supper, and these feedings represent the new thing that God is doing in Jesus.

But, why do we have two feedings in Mark's gospel? The two feedings represent the fact that God's kingdom as revealed by Jesus is for the whole world, for Jew and Gentile alike. As Paul put it, the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is taken down in Christ Jesus.

Notice that one feeding takes place on the Jewish side of the Sea, and the other feeding takes place on the Gentile side of the Sea. Remember that there's more to these feedings than just a good meal. These meals are symbolic, and the disciples of Jesus are supposed to learn something from them.

But, of course the disciples don't get it. In Mark's gospel the disciples never get it. They don't understand that Jesus is the Son of God. They don't understand his teachings, not the first, second or even the third time he teaches them.

Jesus is the one who commands the wind and the waves. Jesus is the one who feeds the people the bread of heaven. But, the miracles do not produce faith in the disciples. Instead they produce amazement, fear, and doubt.

And the disciples aren't the only ones who misunderstand Jesus. The crowds and the religious authorities are clueless too.

## LEADERS FROM JERUSALEM

In fact the religious authorities are angry with Jesus. When Jesus crossed over into Gentile country, and started doing ministry there, he also crossed the line with the Scribes and the Pharisees.

Gentiles are not kosher. Gentiles are unclean. A true teacher of Israel would not allow himself to be polluted in this way.

And so, Scribes and Pharisees come all the way from Jerusalem and cross over into Gentile country in order to confront Jesus. But, they don't confront Jesus directly. Instead, they criticize his disciples. The disciples are eating with unclean hands.

## THE RITUAL DESCRIBED

Now this criticism was not about hygiene. It was about religious ritual.

The hand washing ceremony prescribed by Jewish tradition was quite elaborate. The hands had to be held out, palms up, hands cupped slightly, and water was poured over them.

Then the fist of one hand was used to scrub the other, and then the other fist would scrub the first hand.

Finally the hands were again held out, with palms down, and water was poured over them a second time to cleanse away the dirty water the defiled hands had been scrubbed with. Only then would a person's hands be ceremonially clean.

The story is told of a rabbi who was imprisoned by the Romans. He used the drinking water brought to him in his solitary dungeon cell to wash his hands in this way.

And he almost died of thirst. Such was the importance of this practice.

These rituals seem strange to us, but they did serve a purpose. These customs enabled the Jews to remember that they were God's chosen people.

It was a way of saying that we are “clean” and those other people, those Gentiles are not. We are called to be different from them.

### FEAR INSTEAD OF FAITH

But, according to Jesus these religious leaders missed the forest for the trees. Their tradition had become more important to them than God’s word.

The ritualistic hand washing was originally an attempt to remind devout people that they were chosen by God to be a light to the world. They were to live righteous and holy lives.

This rite symbolized this desire to be pure and holy. But, by Jesus’ time faith had been replaced by fear. Their rituals had become rigid and devoid of their original meaning.

Out of fear they followed the traditions of the elders without question. They seemed to think that if even one tradition were compromised the whole religion would fall.

Fear still does that to us. Fear turns minor concerns into obsessions.

### THE SPOT ON THE WALL

Sometimes this can be true in the church. We become so accustomed to doing something in a certain way that we forget why it is important. Ritual can become superstition and even hinder the work of God.

Harry Emerson Fosdick told about a church in Denmark where the worshippers bowed regularly before a certain spot on the wall. They had been doing that for three centuries, bowing at that one spot in the sanctuary. Nobody could remember why.

Then one day while renovating the church, they removed some of the whitewash on the walls. At the exact spot where the people bowed, they found the image of the Madonna under the whitewash.

People had become so accustomed to bowing before that image that even after it was covered up they still bowed.

For three centuries they still bowed!

## DOCTRINE IS IMPORTANT

How does this happen? How does human tradition that is at odds with the true faith take over? It happens when we focus more upon form than content.

We can't just teach whatever suits our fancy. Doctrine is important. God's Word is more important than what we want and what we think.

And sometimes it is hard for us to see how self-interest blinds us to our true motives.

Eugene Peterson translates verse 9 of our lesson for today, "You get rid of God's command so you won't be inconvenienced in following the religious fashions."

That describes us. We live in a world that values style over substance. We are still "fashion conscious" in everything that we do and that includes religion.

Go to any large church convention, and you'll see first hand how we major in minors. Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Southern Baptists, Pentecostals ... you name it ... we all become so focused on our narrow way of viewing the gospel that we are in danger of missing much of what God has to say to us in His Word.

According to Jesus what we need to do is not judge how our neighbors "do church". What we need to do is examine our own heart in light of God's Word. Jesus once said that we should judge not lest we be judged. We have a log in our own eye. What gives us the right to try and remove a splinter from our neighbor's eye? In fact if we try to do that someone might lose an eye! It has happened. (See Matthew 7:3-5)

## GOOD MAN IN THE WORST SENSE OF THE WORD

Mark Twain once talked about someone who was a "good man in the worst sense of the word". We all know what he means. We all know people who

overtly promote and profess their faith and yet their actions say something else about what they believe.

But, it's not just "those people" who do that. We do that. We too are good men and women in the worst sense of the word. We too fall short of God's glory. We too in one way or another abandon God's Word for human tradition.

Jesus told the religious leaders that they abandoned God's Word for human precepts. And he gave them a concrete example.

## CORBAN

One of the Ten Commandments is "honor your father and mother". And one of the things that "honor" means is to take care of your father and mother in their old age. In fact, just as it often happens in our time, fathers and mothers would give property to their children so that the children could have the resources necessary to take care of the parents in their old age.

But, apparently some of these adult children were greedy. And so the religious leaders created a loophole in the law to take advantage of this situation. Many large organizations now have a plan where you can donate money to them upon your death. But, until you die they pay you a high interest rate on that money. It's a win/win according to those who promote such giving.

Well, the religious authorities of Jesus' day were doing something similar. A person in Jesus' day could declare property Corban that is dedicated to the Temple. Once they did that, then that asset couldn't be sold for the benefit of the parents.

The religious establishment encouraged this practice because the deferred gift ultimately made its way into the temple treasury.

And that's why Jesus called the religious leaders hypocrites. They pretended to be interested in God's law, but in reality they were only interested in gaining wealth for themselves.

Sadly this is still true. Many religious leaders still prey upon the fears and greed of the people in order to gain financial advantage.

And in doing this they distort God's message in order to build their own kingdom.

They substitute human tradition for the Word of God.

## HOLY AND COMPASSIONATE

In Mark's gospel Jesus is portrayed as one who is constantly violating religious observances in favor of doing ministry.

Jesus heals on the Sabbath.

He touches a leper and a dead child. A woman suffering from hemorrhages touches him.

He does not fast. He eats with tax collectors and other notorious sinners.

All of these things were a violation of Jewish tradition, religious laws that were designed to maintain boundaries between the faithful and all others.

But, Jesus seems to say in what he does that sometimes our religious scruples can get in the way of loving God and neighbor. Sometimes our traditions can keep us from being who we are called to be.

I wonder.

What actions cross the line of acceptability with us? How do we try to guard the borders of religious identity?

How do we determine who is "in" and who is "out"?

It is important for us to maintain our Christian integrity in an increasingly secular world. We are called to be different from the world. Holiness is important.

But, so is compassion.



And so we have to make sure that in our desire to be holy we do not become “holier than thou” Christians. We need to make sure that we do not abandon salvation by grace for a misguided works righteousness.

If we do that, we will soon twist God’s Word into a way of getting what we want.

The result will not be gracious or faithful.

Like the religious leaders of old we will see the speck in our neighbor’s eye, but we will miss the log in our own eye.

### SELF-EXAMINATION

Today we take the Lord’s Supper. The Bible tells us that we need to be careful about how we take Communion. We need to prepare by examining our own heart. (1 Corinthians 11:27-32)

And if we are honest we will have to admit that none of us have clean hands. And no amount of water and Ivory soap will make us any cleaner. The stain of sin remains.

But, the Lord’s Supper reminds us that Jesus died for our sins, that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

And it is that grace that enables us to live compassionate and holy lives.

Amen.