

From the Heart

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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.”

FROM THE HEART

“Speak from the heart.”
Have you ever received that advice?

It means that we should speak in a way that is authentic. We should say what we mean, and mean what we say. In a world filled with political posturing and duplicitous deal making, that sounds like a good idea.

But, speaking from the heart is a hard thing to do.

The Bible tells us that the “heart is devious above all else—it is perverse ...” (Jeremiah 17:9)

Jesus in our lesson for today says that the heart can be a home to all kinds of bad things, “evil ideas, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, ... , deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride and folly. All these evils come from within and defile a person.”

So it's not enough to just speak from the heart if our hearts are not right with God.

In fact it's even possible to do the work of the devil in the name of God!
(See for example Mark 3:23-30)

Today's lesson makes it plain.

We need to do more than just speak from the heart.

We need a heart transplant.

That's a radical life and death operation.

It's something that only the greatest surgeon in the universe can perform.

But, thank God we have a Great Physician who specializes in heart transplants, and his Name is Jesus.

The One who created the world can recreate us.

Through the power of God's grace, we are given a new heart, and that changes everything.

When we are saved by grace, we become gracious people.

SALVATION THEN LAW

We see this pattern throughout the Bible.

For example, in the Old Testament, God did not give His people the Law while they were still slaves in Egypt.

God didn't say,

“Obey these laws and maybe I'll think about saving you from slavery.”

No, God saved his people from slavery out of love, and then God gave them the Law.

That made the Law a means of grace.

People who had been saved from slavery were transformed on the inside. They had a new heart.

And out of gratitude they followed the Law, the commands of God.

At least that was the idea.
But, we know that it wasn't that easy.

A CHEAT'N HEART

Much of the Old Testament is the story of how God's people struggled with (to use a Hank William's phrase) "their cheat'n heart."

They were quick to forget the God who saved them, and so they went after other gods.

The prophet said that God's people were like an unfaithful wife, a prostitute even.

And sadly this unfaithfulness eventually led to Exile.

How could God's people keep this from happening again?
How could they make sure that their heart was right before God?

SALVATION BY FAITH

One way to deal with this heart sickness would be to remember the basics of faith.

They could remember that they had been called to trust in God's salvation above all else.

They were a community founded on the grace of God.

The prologue to the Ten Commandments puts it this way,

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ..." (Exodus 20:2)

In other words God told them in the prologue,

"I saved you from slavery out of love, and now out of love I'm going to tell you what it means to a faithful life." And then the Ten Commandments are given.

Grace is followed by a gracious way of life.

Salvation is followed by sanctification, a righteous way of life.

From the very beginning, keeping the Law was never meant to be a way to obtain salvation. Keeping the Law was a response to salvation.

That's why Passover became such an important yearly ritual for devout Jews.

It was a way of remembering that they were a people who had been freed from slavery by the grace of God.

If God had not intervened in their lives they would still be slaves.

But, God did intervene.

And when they remembered that each year, their faith was renewed.

A RELIGION OF RULES AND REGULATIONS

But, some religious leaders decided to make it more complicated.

They began to teach a message of salvation by works instead of salvation by faith. They wrote down volumes of religious rules and regulations.

We run into some of those rules in our lesson for today.

The Scribes and the Pharisees criticize Jesus' disciples because they were not washing their hands before they ate.

We can agree with that.

Cleanliness is akin to godliness after all. Right?

Actually, there's more to it than this.

Hand washing referred to an elaborate ritual that was practiced by these ultra religious leaders before a meal.

(The commentator, William Barclay does a good job of describing this in great detail if you want to learn more about this.

We have those commentaries in our library by the way.

Just a short commercial for our library. Now back to our regularly scheduled sermon!)

Anyway, this elaborate ritual wasn't required by God's law. It was a man made custom that had been turned into an article of faith by the religious leaders of the day.

The Scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem wanted to get something on Jesus. And when they couldn't, they complained about the actions of his disciples.

These backwoods fishermen that Jesus called "disciples" weren't washing their hands in the ritually prescribed manner.

"Why didn't you train your disciples to be more holy Jesus?"

What's wrong with you?
What kind of Rabbi are you anyway?"

JESUS' CHALLENGES THE LEADERS

This seems like such a silly thing to complain about. And Jesus must have agreed because he totally ignores the complaint of these religious leaders.

Instead, Jesus goes right into a scathing indictment of the religious leaders. He says,

"Isaiah had it right about you guys. You're hypocrites. What you say and what you do don't match up. You abandon God's law and make up your own rules."

In Matthew's gospel there's a scene in which Jesus just shook his head in frustration and told these same folks, "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. You major in minors, while ignoring the more important matters of the law ... justice, and mercy, and faith. (See Matthew 23:23-25)

These folks made sure their hands and utensils were meticulously clean on the outside. But, they neglected the inside. They did not have a heart for God.

They were hypocrites.
They said one thing and did another.

A COMMANDMENT DISTORTED

And then Jesus gave a devastating example of their hypocrisy in action.

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 (surprise, surprise) some of these adult children were greedy. They wanted to find a way around their obligation. And the religious leaders were more than happy to help them out.

They created a loophole in the law to take advantage of this situation. A person could declare property Corban, that is dedicated to the Temple.

Once they did that, then the asset couldn't be sold for the benefit of the parents because it “technically” belonged to God. (Although the person who made this declaration was free to use that property as he or she wished. He just couldn't give any money to support his parents.)

The religious establishment encouraged this practice because the deferred gift often made its way into the temple treasury. So through the magic of legal chicanery they were able to turn God's commandment on its head.

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.

The problem with their lives couldn't be solved by creating more rules and regulations.

They needed a change of heart.

CHANGE COMES FROM THE INSIDE

Jesus then turned to the crowd that gathered and said, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

In other words, everyone is responsible for their own actions. Don't blame your environment. Don't blame your religious and political leaders. Look at your own heart.

What are you doing and saying on the inside?
That's what really makes a difference.

A religion of rules and regulations will never change a person's heart.

And if we insist on being legalistic, creating a religion that says don't do this and don't do that, we will not help people come to faith. Instead, we will lay the groundwork for abuse.

I've noticed that often "religious" people who commit some kind of abuse often are people who are very rigid and judgmental in their approach to the faith. Maybe they are trying to control their evil impulses by surrounding themselves with rules and regulations.

But, that never works. Sin has a way of working through those rules and regulations, and we become "good" men and women in the worst sense of the word. And sometimes that hypocrisy becomes a Scarlet Letter for all to see.

I saw this legalistic approach lampooned in a cartoon recently.

It was entitled, "Hellfire and Dalmatians."
That's Dalmatian as in a breed of dog!

A preacher dog clothed in a robe was standing at the pulpit. He had a Bible in his left paw and his right paw pointed toward the sky.

The pews were filled with other dalmatians in their Sunday best paying rapt attention to the preacher dog.

And the preacher dog was quoting from "scripture" in this way:

"And he said unto them, Bad dogs, no, no!"

The thing that makes this cartoon funny is that in some cases it is true. When we reduce faith to don't do this and don't do that, it's more like scolding the dog than anything else.

I don't know about your dog, but back when I had a dog, telling him "no" didn't do any good. It just got more excited.

And the Bible tells us that the same is true with human beings. When we construct a faith solely out of rules and regulations it just gives people bad ideas.

It's like we say to ourselves, "Wow, if they don't want me to do that, it must be pretty good!"

And so, even God's good commandments can have a bad effect when they are used in the wrong way.
(See Romans 7:21)

Now don't misunderstand. We should just say "no" to many things. But, saying just saying "no" is not a good strategy for bringing about lasting, positive change, with dogs or human beings.

Something has to change on the inside.

THE DISCIPLE'S QUESTION

Now Jesus' disciples were totally blown away by what Jesus said to the crowd.

The disciples were used to a religion based upon rules and regulations. Those rules and regulations had been a part of their lives from the very beginning. So they thought Jesus must have been speaking in parables again.

That wasn't true of course. Our Scripture tells us that Jesus wanted the crowd to "listen and understand."
He was trying to make it as plain as he could.

But, when you are saying something radically different from what the world around you is saying, you often have to come at it from many different angles.

Jesus put it another way for his disciples.
And this time he actually challenged another “sacred cow”, the kosher food laws.

Jesus said, “What you eat doesn’t kill you.
You eat the food. It’s digested.
And that’s that.

But, what can kill you are the dark things you hold in your hearts. Those things are really dangerous and can lead to horrendous actions.” (21-22)

We saw a terrible example of this truth last week.
A man held anger in his heart so long that it finally came out in extreme violence, and two people were killed on TV.

I would like to think that this man was an aberration, a freak of nature.

But, many of us hold things in our hearts that do us harm.
We may not kill someone, but we do other things that are harmful.

Maybe we destroy relationships that are important to us.
Maybe we raise our blood pressure and destroy our health.
Maybe we worship the almighty dollar instead of the Almighty.

All these sins begin in the heart, and they can’t be controlled by elaborate rules and regulations.
These sins can only be changed by a change of heart.

God has to lead us out of slavery to the Promised Land.
God has to strike us blind on the road to Damascus.
God has turn us inside out and upside down, and make us into new creations.

We don’t need good advice.
We need gospel.
We need to be saved.

Thank God in Jesus Christ this is possible.

In Jesus our sins are forgiven and we are freed to live a life of service and hope. Paul in his letter to the Romans in a moment of true confession admits that he isn't living the kind of life he should. In fact he's often doing the very opposite of what he should be doing.

And in desperation he cries out, "Who can deliver me?"

And then he remembers. Jesus can. Jesus has.

You know there's a praise and worship song that is entitled, "Change my heart O God."

I think that should be our prayer this morning.

"Change our hearts O God.

Make them ever true."

Who can deliver us? Jesus can. Jesus has.

Amen.