

**THEFIELD CHAPEL**

Sunday 22 September 2003 6:30pm

**MARK 7 vv 1 - 23**

Mark 7:1-23

*The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and [2] saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. [3] (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. [4] When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)*

*[5] So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"*

*[6] He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:*

*" These people honour me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.*

*[7] They worship me in vain,  
their teachings are but rules taught by men.'*

*[8] You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."*

*[9] And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! [10] For Moses said, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' [11] But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), [12] then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. [13] Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."*

*[14] Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. [15] Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" [16]*

*[17] After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. [18] "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? [19] For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")*

*[20] He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' [21] For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, [22] greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. [23] All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'*

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According to Mark's gospel, this is now Jesus' fifth encounter with the Pharisees; Mark records a total of eight such encounters.

In Mark 2:16 we read *When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"*

In Mark 2:18 we read *Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"*

In Mark 2:24, where Jesus and the disciples were plucking grains of corn as they walked through a cornfield on the Sabbath, we read *The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"*

In Mark 3:6, when Jesus healed a man with a shrivelled hand on the Sabbath, we read *Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.*

And in tonight's passage we read in Mark 7:5 *So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"*

Three more times in chapters to come, the Pharisees torment Jesus with their questions and tricks.

Just who were these Pharisees? They don't appear in the OT at all and we have no written accounts about the origin of the Pharisees. The earliest reference to them is dated roughly around 150 BC, where the historian Josephus refers to Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. They seem to have risen to a position of power in about 76 BC. So all we can really say is that they must have emerged sometime in that mysterious period of 400 years between the close of the OT and the opening of the NT... most likely when the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem had been completed and the Jews were relatively settled back into their homeland after the Babylonian captivity.

As with so many societies and communities, as soon as the common enemy has gone, the internal squabbles and factions have fertile soil in which to grow! Even the Roman invasion and occupation were not enough to unite the different factions of the Jews. Just in passing, though, it's worthwhile noting that the one thing that did unite the different factions was the desire to have Jesus killed. Imagine that - they regarded Jesus as a bigger threat than the invading and occupying Roman army!

Judaism in New Testament times was diverse. There were different denominations of Jews, just as there are many denominations within the Christian Church today – not to mention the sects which claim, but fail, to come within the broad church. Along with the Pharisees and Sadducees, there were the Herodians, the Zealots and the Essenes.

**The Sadducees** were the aristocrats of the time. They were the party of the rich and the high priestly families. They were in charge of the Temple and its services. They claimed to be descendants of Zadok, high priest in the time of Solomon. However, the true derivation of their name is unknown. We know that they were generally in opposition to the Pharisees. They sought to conserve the beliefs and practices of the past. They opposed the oral law, accepting only the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, as the ultimate authority. The Sadducees were materialistic in their outlook. They did not believe in life after death (which is why they were sad, you see!) neither did they believe in any reward or punishment beyond this life. They denied the existence of angels and demons. They did not believe that God was concerned with what people did. Rather people were totally free. They were politically oriented, supporters of ruling powers, and wanted nothing to threaten their position and wealth, so they strongly opposed Jesus.

**The Zealots** receive only brief mention in the New Testament. Simon, one of the disciples, is called Zealot. The Zealots were the extreme wing of the Pharisees. But in contrast with the Pharisees, they believed that only God had the right to rule over the Jews. They were willing to fight and die for that belief. For them patriotism and religion were inseparable.

**The Herodians** are mentioned in only three places in the New Testament: once in Matthew and twice in Mark. In the earliest reference in Mark, they joined with the Pharisees in a plot to kill Jesus. The other two passages refer to the sending of Pharisees and Herodians to ask Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar. It is assumed that they were Jews who supported Herod Antipas or sought to have a descendant of Herod the Great given authority over Palestine. At this time, of course, Judea in the south and Samaria in the north were under Roman governors.

**The Essenes** we know of through the writings of the historians Josephus and Philo. They are not mentioned in the New Testament but became famous posthumously and recently since 1947 with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. They may have begun at about the same time as the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Essenes were a bit like monks and hermits, many of whom lived in the desert region of Qumran, near the Dead Sea. The Essenes devoted themselves to the study of the law. They went beyond the Pharisees in their rigid understanding of it. There is no evidence that either Jesus or John the Baptist had ever had any contact with them, but Jesus would have strongly opposed their understanding of the law. And for that reason, it's safe to assume that the Essenes would have opposed Jesus too.

But **the Pharisees** constituted the most important group. They always appear in the Gospels as the opponents of Jesus. Paul claimed that he was a Pharisee before becoming

a Christian in Philippians 3v5. They were the most numerous of the groups, although the (sometimes reliable) historian Josephus states that they numbered only about six thousand. They controlled the synagogues and exercised quite a lot of control over the general population.

The name “Pharisee” means “the separated one.” It may mean that they separated themselves from the masses of the people or that they separated themselves to the study and interpretation of the law. It is usually assumed that they were the spiritual descendants of the Hasidim, the loyal fighters for religious freedom in the time of Judas Maccabeus – one of Israel’s rulers in the period between the testaments. They appear to be responsible for the transformation of Judaism from a religion of sacrifice to one of law. They were the developers of oral traditions, the teachers of the two-fold law: written and spoken. They saw the way to God as being through obedience to the law. Surprisingly, they were the progressive party of the day, willing to adopt new ideas and adapt the law to new situations.

The Pharisees were strongly monotheistic. They accepted all the Old Testament as authoritative. They affirmed the reality of angels and demons. They had a firm belief in life after death and the resurrection of the body. They were also missionaries, seeking to convert the Gentiles – although Jesus didn’t exactly commend them for that as we read in Matthew 23:15: *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.”*

But to the people of the time, the Pharisees were heroes, not villains. The Pharisees were all lay people, not priests. They were a reform movement who’s passion was to help ordinary people in Israel learn to live out their devotion to God. They believed that every detail of the Old Testament law was to be applied to everyday life.

The Pharisees believed that every person ought to strive for the same level of godliness that God required of the Jewish priests who served in the temple in Jerusalem. They believed that the OT taught that Israel was to be a nation of priests, and that God required all people in Israel to live by the same standards he required of the Jewish priests. So the Pharisees expected a higher level of obedience and commitment among the people than the OT required of people. In the Old Testament law God required the temple priest to go through a special washing ritual before eating a meal that came from the temple offering. Now the temple priest only had to go through this washing ritual when in the temple and eating a temple sacrifice as a meal. But the Pharisees expanded that requirement to apply to all Jewish people during all meals. They believed that all Jewish people ought to follow the example of the temple priests by ritually washing before each and every meal - this was nothing to do with hygiene - this was a ceremonial washing.

The Pharisees saw God as concerned with the life of individual people without denying that the individual was responsible for how he or she lived. They had little interest in

politics. The Pharisees opposed Jesus because He refused to accept the teachings of the oral law and the many customs and traditions that they had tacked onto Judaism.

While I was writing this, it was getting very tempting to try and equate some of our present-day Christian denominations with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Zealots and Essenes of the past. Actually I have to admit it was quite fun – but not very helpful. The important thing to realise is that there is something of the Pharisees and Sadducees in all our Churches. We may like to think of ourselves as “People of the Book” – using Scripture only as our basis of Church life, and rejecting the legalistic traditions and superstitions which have been tacked onto Christianity over the two millennia since Jesus walked the earth.

We like to think that we don't have a history of ceremony or traditional practice dating back to the Dark Ages. We don't have any time for those rules and regulations that came from the Popes and Princes of old. We are Therfield, we are independent evangelicals who recognise only Scripture as our basis for Church life and personal conduct. We have no time for the “oral tradition” .... Well maybe not. But we do have the newer version of all that. We do have the “This Is The Way We Do Things Here” tradition.

It's surprising to realise just how much we can also be slaves to tradition. The time of the Evening Service is 6:30 ... you won't find that in Scripture, but imagine the uproar if someone suggested a different time! Nowhere in Scripture will you find any requirement to celebrate Christmas ... it is a tacked-on tradition - but I can't imagine any of us wanting to abandon our Christmas Service.

Not all traditions and customs are unhelpful, of course – as long as they don't contradict Scripture. And having the Evening Service at the same time each Sunday does make life more simple. But woe betide us when these customs and habits take on any level of real importance to us. Woe betide us when we spend more time debating when the Evening Service should start than we spend following Jesus' command to go and spread the Gospel to all people.

And woe betide us even more when we would prefer people to “fit in” with Therfield's way of doing things than making sure that they have been brought face-to-face with our living Lord Jesus Christ.

But tonight's passage isn't about our Church Life. It isn't even about the question of traditions or even the question of ceremonial hand-washing – that was all a red herring. The Pharisees had already determined that they wanted Jesus dead and now they were just looking for ammunition to use against him. You'll notice how Jesus didn't bother to answer them concerning the question of hand-washing.

Jesus sees the heart. He sees the hearts of the Pharisees and knows exactly the real issues. So what does he say to them? Hypocrites, Hypocrites, Hypocrites!! You've abandoned God's teaching in favour of your own petty rules and regulations. You claim to be religious but you've elbowed God out of his position of authority. And when your

consciences are pricked by the commandments of Scripture, you devise ways of getting round them and still making yourselves look good in the eyes of men.

Then Jesus gives us an example of their kind of hypocrisy. He cites the fifth commandment: Honour your Father and Mother. Then he cites a tradition among the Pharisees called "Corban." Apparently the practice of "Corban" was like deferred giving, where we might give a piece of property to a charity but retain possession of that property until after we die. Technically it belongs to the charity, but the charity doesn't actually assume possession of the property until after the person dies. The practice of Corban was where an asset--a bank account, a piece of property, or whatever - was promised to the temple but the person retained possession of it until death. According to the traditions of the Pharisees, as soon as you declared something "Corban" you couldn't use it for anything else. If you declared a sum of money "Corban" but then your Mother or Father became ill or poor, you couldn't touch that money because it was "Corban." Some people actually declared their assets Corban, not because they wanted to give it to God, but because they didn't want to use it to help their parents. So the practice of Corban provided what they saw as a loophole in the clear command of God. Jesus says that this is an act of hypocrisy because it nullifies God's command with a human tradition.

While I doubt that any of us would go to that kind of extreme, isn't there just a bit of Pharisee in all of us? Isn't there some hypocrisy in all of us? Don't we sometimes use Church activities as excuse for neglecting family and friends? Aren't there times when we would rather stand up in a pulpit and preach God's Love rather than rolling up our shirt-sleeves and actually showing it with our time, money and energy?

Don't we look oh-so spiritual when we're leading a Bible Study and deepening the understanding of God's Word for those in our group - but what an excellent smoke-screen to cover-up for the fact that we have no time to listen to the worries of our wives, husbands or children.

Don't we feel good when we're asked to lead the prayers in Church ... but who would ever guess that we actually hide from our elderly next-door neighbours in case they ask us for some help with the shopping?

Don't we feel oh-so righteous when we tell our work colleagues that pilfering the stationery cupboard is not an option for a Christian ... but how would they react if they knew that we'd jump at the chance of having a one-off act of adultery with the boss' secretary if we knew we wouldn't be found-out!

What did Jesus tell his disciples about the Pharisees? Well, many things - but two in particular are important.

Firstly:

*Luke 12:1-3*

*"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, **which is hypocrisy.** [2] There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. [3]*

*What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.*

The more you practise hypocrisy, the easier it gets and the more you do it - it grows like yeast and spreads. Sometimes you get caught out - and it can be embarrassing. And sometimes, your own acts of hypocrisy can help other people to justify their own acts of hypocrisy. Let's be warned that each and every hypocritical action and thought will be revealed at judgement.

And the second thing Jesus told his disciples about the Pharisees is this

*Matthew 5:20*

*For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Does that strike you as a bit of a contrast? On the one hand Jesus is calling the Pharisees hypocrites and sons of hell - and then the next minute he's telling his disciples that their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees! It would be easy to think that, here, Jesus is holding up the Pharisees as a shining example of righteousness. Of course, he isn't. In the context of Matt 5, Jesus was talking about the OT Laws and how he had come to fulfil them, not abolish them. To the disciples in the early days, the Pharisees would still be regarded as people for whom respect was due because of their apparent strict adherence to the Law. When you couple the passage in Matthew with our reading from Mark tonight, it all falls into place. Jesus was saying that the righteousness of the Pharisees was a myth. They had twisted the OT Laws to suit themselves and even replaced them with their own misguided traditions. So even if it were possible to achieve righteousness by following the Law, the Pharisees would miss out.

By trusting in Jesus, who is the fulfilment of the Law, the disciples would get their righteousness - a righteousness that would exceed that of the Pharisees, who were not only rejecting the OT Law, but rejecting Jesus too.

Now let's move on to verse 14 of tonight passage in Mark 7:

You'll remember that Jesus didn't answer the Pharisees regarding the question of ritual hand-washing. He knew that there was no point, and that they were just trying to trick him anyway. But there would have been a crowd of people around who had heard the question and they deserved an answer. As I said earlier, the ordinary people would have looked-up to the Pharisees and seen this as a legitimate question that needed an answer. To them, the question regarding ritual hand washing would be of concern. And Jesus has to re-educate them ...

*Mark 7:14-19*

*Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. [15] Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" [16]*

[17] After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. [18] "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? [19] For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")

We're not told how the crowd reacted to that. Perhaps they all rushed off in delight and started making bacon sandwiches!

To them, the news that there were no foods which were "ritually unclean" must have hit them like a bombshell. Not only did it overturn the teaching of their much-respected and infallible Pharisees, it also cut against the grain of OT Law.

Imagine how you'd react if one of your most respected preachers stood up in front of you and proclaimed that, to be a good Christian, you no longer needed to go to Church, say your prayers, read your Bible or contribute to the Offering! Those with a good grounding in Scripture would be quite horrified: but those who had little grounding in Scripture and relied entirely on the word of their teachers would find this amazingly liberating! And I expect that the Jews had that same mix of reactions.

*"Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'?"*

We need to treat those words with a little bit of thought and caution. Jesus was talking about "ritual cleanliness" and nothing else. What he was saying is that eating bacon (which was a ritually unclean meat) will not compromise your standing before God any more than eating lamb, which was ritually clean. There is no "spiritual" difference and so we should not listen to any man-made rules that tell us otherwise. That is what Jesus said: no more and no less.

I urged a little bit of caution about this statement because it could be easy to take it to the extreme. If *nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'* then, surely, a diet of hamburgers, alcohol, cigarettes and even drugs is perfectly OK! We can watch porn and violence on TV without it affecting us. We don't need to worry about the music we listen to, the newspapers we read - because none of this can affect us or affect our standing with God! Surely Jesus' words give us justification for gratifying our bodies in anyway we choose!

I can very well imagine some less mature Christians thinking that way, and the rest of us need to know how to counter that argument.

Firstly - Jesus was talking about food ... the stuff we eat to stay alive. He was not talking about other indulgences.

Secondly - and I think this is the crux of the matter -

1 Cor. 6:19-20: *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; [20] you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.*

There was a time when it wasn't realised that smoking was bad for the health. There were no nagging doctors and government campaigns to try and stop people smoking. My old mate C.S. Lewis was quite a heavy smoker. Even the famous preacher C.H. Spurgeon proclaimed that he could smoke a cigar to the glory of God! And I'm quite convinced he could! It was done in ignorance and innocence.

But, as it's become clear that there are bad health risks associated with smoking, Christians now have, I believe, a responsibility towards their own bodies which would lead them to the conclusion that smoking was - for want of a better word - wrong.

So is smoking a sin? I think I would pull-back from answering "yes" to that question. Eating bacon sandwiches is not a sin - that's what Jesus was saying - but eating bacon sandwiches to the point where they were clogging up your arteries and making you ill is not honouring God with your body! Jesus turned water into wine ... but condemns drunkenness. There is a question of balance here.

The drugs question is a real source of debate today. Should cannabis be legalised? What about other drugs that haven't yet been shown to generally have long-term serious health risks - drugs like Ecstasy? Christians will find themselves struggling with those questions every bit as much as the rest of society. Leaving aside the health questions, let our yardstick be: how honouring - or dishonouring - such things are to our bodies, which are the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. We are warned in several places not to give-in, or become addicted to, the desires of the flesh.

Moving on to verse 20 ...

*"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' [21] For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, [22] greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. [23] All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' "*

And here Jesus gets to the nub of the matter. It's not what we eat or drink or read or listen to or watch on TV that makes us sinful ... it's what we say and do and think. It's how we treat other people, it's our attitudes, it's our actions (or lack of them), it's our failure to love God with all our hearts and minds and it's our failure to love our neighbour as ourselves.

While what we eat or drink or smoke or inject into our veins or watch on TV or read in magazines might fuel our sinful nature, at the end of the day, it's what's in our hearts that makes us unclean.

And let's remember that those words were primarily directed at the Pharisees. For all their observance of the minutiae of Jewish Law, for all their strictness about what they ate, for all their apparent spirituality - they were evil. And that's what made them hypocrites and that's why Jesus directed his wrath against them. Their outward appearance was one of religious perfection but inside they were full of envy, greed, lovelessness, lies, slander and murder.

One little bit of hypocrisy breeds other hypocrisies - and evil multiplies. That's why Jesus warned his disciples - and us - about the yeast of the Pharisees.

The problem with the Pharisees is that they were trying an outside-in approach to try and solve the sin problem. They thought sin could be rooted out by doing outward actions like religious rituals and abstaining from certain foods. Don't we sometimes, without realising it, think the same way? If we just pass the right legislation, or elect the right politicians, or control the media, or get sex and violence off TV, then that will root out the sin that's destroying our culture. What we fail to realize is that the human heart's condition remains the same even if we do those things. These wrong things in society and in the media are the symptoms, not the cause of human evil.

Jesus, on the other hand, takes an inside-out approach to solving the sin problem. Until the human heart undergoes a radical transformation, all the outward efforts and legislation you can imagine won't be enough. The human heart is where the change needs to begin. And not just the human heart - but yours and mine.

We have the good news of Jesus Christ, which is the only power that can transform the human heart. This is why the Bible calls the gospel of Jesus Christ the power of God that accomplishes salvation in people. Nothing else can do that: legislation can't, education can't, money can't, science can't. For our part, we must surrender all those dusty corners and dark rooms of our hearts to him. Avoiding sin is the daily task of the Christian - and as all sin comes from the heart, there can be no better place than that to hand over to our Lord Jesus Christ as his dwelling place. But it has to be the whole heart. We cannot and must not keep back for ourselves some little reserved areas from which his is forbidden access. Because it's in those areas that the yeast of the Pharisees grows. And if our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees before we can claim our place in the Kingdom of God, there's no other way but to sign our lives over to Jesus who is the fulfilment of the whole Law of God.

As for what we eat or drink, or read or watch on TV - these things are of secondary importance. But given that we have a choice over what goes into us: *Whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. (Philip. 4:8)*

The end