

THEFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

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Mark 7:1-23 Washing hearts

Did you hear about the man who opened a laundrette next door to the church? He had heard that cleanliness was next to godliness!

It's an old saying, and just as old a joke. But the reason it still raises a laugh (or groan) is because there is some truth in the sentiment. Cleanliness is to do with our outward appearance and physical hygiene. Godliness is to do with our inward condition and moral purity. These two have always been interrelated, we see that even in Mark's Gospel, for instance where the demon possessed man Legion is cleansed from his spiritual evil, and gets cleaned up physically too.

When God gave the details of his requirements for mankind to the people of Israel, he did not draw a sharp distinction between the physical and the spiritual. In fact, all through those books of the law, we have a complete juxtaposition of regulations governing our physical lives, and spiritual requirements. Love the Lord your God. And don't mix fibres in your clothing. Worship God alone. And don't touch dead bodies.

Part of the reason for this is that God is, of course, concerned with every area of our lives. The distinction between spiritual and physical which we so often make comes, to a large extent, from Greek thinking and not from God himself. We might think of religion as spiritual, but God says true religion is to look after orphans and widows – rather practical, don't you think?

But the Old Testament ideas of clean and unclean foods are not just an expression of God's care for our diet. There are many ideas about why God would have banned pork, for example, from diets – allegedly it does not keep as well as other meats in a hot climate, and allegedly more people are likely to be allergic to it. But when even die-hard vegetarians can be tempted by the smell of bacon cooking, you have to admit that this rule is difficult to justify on the grounds of "being for our own good".

There is a much bigger idea here, just as there is in so many of the Old Testament regulations. The emphasis on ceremonial cleanliness was all about being fit to come into God's presence, rather than keeping our bodies healthy. The lists of do's and don'ts showed God's people that they had to approach God in the right way, that there is a difference between right and wrong, that God will only ever accept what is right, and that God alone is able to make the rules about what is right and what is not.

Now I'm not saying that these laws were entirely arbitrary or random. In many ways, the pattern of clean and unclean reveals a picture of God's character itself. Pictures are good in the right context, but they are not the real thing. A man might treasure a picture of his sweet-heart while he is abroad, but once he returns it is the real woman he is interested in. So it is with the Law and God. God is the one we are to love, and the Law is just one representation of him.

Sadly, the real intent of the Law was lost by the religious leaders down through the centuries, who tended to focus on the outward regulations instead of the inward. Not only so, but they began to add to the written requirements, going far beyond what God had said in the first place. Their original intent may have been good – to prevent accidental trespass of God’s laws by surrounding them with other laws. So you might accidentally break one of their traditions, but were unlikely to stray as far as trespassing the revealed law. If the law said the speed limit is 60 miles an hour, their tradition might say drive at 50, just to be on the safe side.

However, over time those traditions became regarded as on a par with the original laws, and the religious leaders expected people to follow them, well, religiously. And so if your speed crept up to 55, the Jewish police would prosecute you for being 5 miles an hour above their traditional limit, rather than congratulating you for being well within the real limit of 60.

As they hadn’t invented speed limits yet, one such tradition was the washing of hands before meals. Now on the face of it, that is a good idea, and one which parents up and down the country frequently try to instil into their little children. “no dirty hands at the table”, “go and wash your hands before tea”. In fact, basic hygiene rules like that are credited with major reductions in disease, and are doubly important in cultures where cutlery is not used at all, but all food is consumed with your hands.

The washing which the Pharisees and others promoted was not a simple rub under the tap, but a ceremonial wash inspired by rules given to the priests before they could approach the altar. If priests could incur God’s displeasure by handling sacrifices without washing first, perhaps God would be more pleased with ordinary people if they washed in a similar way before handling any food, so the argument went.

While it was probably expected that many “ordinary” people would not follow these traditions to the letter, it was certainly the case that Rabbis and their disciples would follow them closely – and encourage others to do so too. But this new and unorthodox rabbi wasn’t towing the party line. So a group of Pharisees and teachers had been dispatched from Jerusalem to observe Jesus and his disciples. Some think this was triggered by rumours of an incident where thousands of unwashed people were fed on a dirty hillside by this unconventional rabbi! The tip-off proved to be accurate, for Jesus’ disciples were clearly seen to be eating without cleansing themselves first. Scandalous behaviour for 0th Century Israel.

The Pharisees get more than the bargain for when they confront Jesus about this. “Don’t you care about the behaviour and reputation of your disciples?” is effectively what they ask. “Don’t you care about the commandments of God?” is effectively Christ’s reply.

What Jesus exposes is just how far their traditions had drifted from God’s original intent, to the extent that it was even possible to follow their traditions and *break* God’s revealed law – the very law that those traditions were supposed to protect. Like the Telegraph exposing the ridiculous and unjustifiable claims some MPs made, even where they were within the letter of their contracts, so Jesus exposes how ridiculous their system of traditions has become.

Jesus intent was not to show that everything in their traditions was stupid, but to show that these man-made regulations can quickly get out of kilter with what God requires, and end up corrupting the picture of God that is in the Law. While some held that the traditions of the elders, handed down from generation to generation, were just as valuable as the Law God gave to Moses, Jesus points out how that can never be the case. Even with the best intentions, we have a habit of mucking things up when we attempt to make our own rules.

I suspect when the tradition of Corban was originally established, their motives were good enough – to allow people to set aside part of their wealth to serve God. I guess it was a bit like leaving part of your estate to charity in your will – it didn't stop you living in your house, but did mean the charity would benefit when you die. But some unscrupulous people were able to exploit this idea by promising to God resources which they should have spent looking after their parents, as was expected and even demanded by the Law. Their "Corban" promise would cost them little if anything, as they could continue to use their wealth whilst they were alive; but it meant they could claim it belonged to God and so couldn't be spent on their parents. Crucially, the Pharisees were prepared to let that sort of abuse happen. They themselves had so blurred the distinction between God's rules and their own that they couldn't see that this was breaking one of the Ten Commandments!

In contrast, God's laws – even those that we find odd – are all perfectly consistent with each other. By keeping one, you do not risk breaking another. There are no loop-holes; his law is, as the psalmist reminds us, perfect (Psalm 19:7).

This is the first of two great dangers which Jesus exposes in this passage – the Danger of Adding to God's word.

It's not just the Pharisees that fell into that trap. The early church did, the Roman Catholics certainly did, and the Protestant denominations continue to do today. Dare I say we at Therfield, as with other churches up and down the land, do too.

All too easily, we confuse our own traditions with God's actual requirements on us, we tie ourselves unnecessarily in knots and confuse and put off outsiders as a result. We are not as tradition-bound as some, fortunately we don't require people to put on their best clothes before stepping through our door, nor do we insist on absolute silence before (or even during) the service.

But we have built up our own traditions around, for example, our Sunday services; or dare I say it our emphasis on the intellectual rather than the emotional. We have our views on how the Communion service should be run, we have established traditions for Saturday events and bi-annual weekends at Letton Hall. None of these things are wrong; so long as we remember that they are just our traditions, they are not part of God's revelation, they are not the only way of doing or being church. So when they become no longer relevant, or we discover better ways of doing things, then we can change. The key challenge here is to recognise when we are putting unnecessary obstacles between other people and the Lord, and to have the grace to change those traditions to suit.

During the Reformation, the Protestant reformers emphasised a principle called "sola scriptura" – which is Latin for "the Scripture alone". It is the Bible alone which is our supreme authority in life.

That doesn't mean we can't be helped by reading books or listening to sermons. But it does mean we keep returning to the Bible for guidance, inspiration, and truth. We avoid tying ourselves in knots if one sermon or book contradicts another, because what we look for is an increased understanding of God's word, not another word to supplement it.

Having torn the ground out from under their traditions, Jesus then goes a radical step further. In two sentences, he sweeps away all the legislation about ceremonial cleanliness, and replaces it with a much deeper measure of our fitness to come before God.

¹⁵Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean'."

Part of the problem was that the Jews had become fixated on the superficial requirements of the law, and that had completely distracted them from its real message. In going overboard on the requirements for external cleanliness before coming to God, they had lost sight of the need for internal purity. Although it takes some self-discipline, it is so much easier to keep a few rituals than it is to keep a pure heart.

How easy it is to get caught up with the outward and easily spotted things! How much more difficult to deal with our inner selves, with what the bible calls our heart. This does not mean our emotions as opposed to our mind, but rather the core of our being, who we really are on the inside.

Am I more concerned with my outward appearance than my inward heart? I am much more likely to change out of my garden-stained jeans to come to chapel, than to spend even 5 minutes in prayer before coming up the hill. There's nothing wrong with wearing clean clothes to chapel; but that won't prepare us to meet with God.

This is the second great danger which Jesus exposes in this passage – the Danger of dealing with the superficial issues, not the heart of the matter, which of course is our hearts.

All those laws the Jews had on ceremonial purity were not the real deal. What God is concerned about is your character, your heart, your soul, the core of your being – not what you had for dinner. It's not your food that dictates your character. If anything, it's your character that dictates your food!

True defilement is not coming into contact with something declared "unclean", but doing, saying or even *thinking* something which falls short of God's standards. The Pharisees might well be able to keep themselves from ceremonial uncleanness, but they were hopelessly off the mark in their hearts. And so are we. And so is everyone.

This has quite profound implications. For the Jews, or at least for the Jews that wanted to follow Christ, it meant they would have to re-think their attitudes to the Law, which as you can imagine was a controversial exercise. Had God changed his mind or his standards? Surely not, in which case they should continue to observe the Law. But was the Law able to save them? Of course not, this is the core of Christ's teaching, emphasised by all the Apostles – we can only be saved by faith in Christ who died for us – so they don't need to observe the law any more. You can see how much scope there was for confusion and even conflict over this in the early church.

Interestingly, in his otherwise almost identical account, Matthew does not record the comment that “Jesus declared all foods clean” which we have in v19. Some suggest that this indicates there was some disagreement even amongst the Gospel writers on this point, and that Jesus could not have been explicit about it otherwise there would be no debate. But even without that explicit statement, the principle is clearly here, and it wasn’t long before the church stopped following the ceremonial laws – just as, come to that, it was not long before the entire Jewish sacrificial system was brought to an end with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

At a simplistic level, this does seem to be a case of contradiction between the Old and New testaments. Does what God requires of men and women really change? The truth, of course, is that God never changes, but we do. The law required lots of regular sacrifices to be made for sin, but after Christ’s death this was no longer necessary. The same was true for ceremonial cleanliness. That black-and-white grainy picture of God which had been so valuable in Old testament times was as nothing compared to the picture of God we have in Christ. Clearly when Christ walked the earth people could look to him and see God. But also for us as we can look back at the full colour video footage we have of him in the Gospels, and know God’s character far better than we could be looking just at the Law.

The implications go beyond our understanding of Old and New testaments. There is an increasing tendency for people to blame their behaviour on their environment, upbringing, or even their genes. “I was bored” is one of the first excuses you get for bad behaviour from children in the home, but it is not a valid reason for behaving badly. You can be bored and behave well. If a child behaves badly, it is because they choose to, because in their heart they want to misbehave, even though they know it was wrong.

Now there is no doubt that environmental factors have an influence on the way we behave, and that the case for improving people’s environment is a good one. But it is not the reason people commit crime. The unpalatable truth is that our characters are flawed, and that is why our behaviour is too. The longer people continue to make excuses for their behaviour, to blame circumstances or other people or even, bizarrely, the alcohol or drugs they have chosen to take, the longer people will fail to improve themselves. Only when we take responsibility for our own actions, can we address the core issue.

Even psychologists today are realising this. Take a sadly all too common case like relationship problems in marriage. The husband might say of his wife “she really drives me mad when she does such and such”, but a good counsellor will get him to rephrase that – “I really get mad when I see you do that”. Subtle, perhaps, but important to make the point that we are not slaves to other influences, and have the ability to control ourselves.

However, while it may be the case that a couple can choose to put in the effort needed to restore their marriage and to make themselves acceptable to each-other again, the same cannot be said about ourselves and God. It is not just a matter of will power or effort, there is a massive gulf between what he expects of us and what we are capable of delivering.

Just look at the list of things Jesus classifies as unclean things springing from our hearts – things which make us unclean in God’s sight.

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.

Even in reading this, do we not sub-consciously fall into the same trap as the Pharisees? When we read this, what registers in our minds is:

²¹ *For from within, out of men's hearts, come sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² lewdness.*

We miss off the *evil thoughts, greed, malice, deceit, envy, slander, arrogance and folly* because obviously these attitudes and words are not as important as the deeds! We concentrate and even pride ourselves on not doing the deeds. Few of us are thieves, murderers or adulterers. But we all too easily overlook the attitudes – all of us are, to a greater or lesser extent, greedy, envious or arrogant. And how easy it is to slander someone we have crossed swords with, even a brother or sister in the Lord.

We read this incident about the importance of inner holiness as opposed to outer appearance, accept that of course the heart is the problem and that is what Jesus dealt with, but STILL we only see what is on the outside!

This only serves to illustrate the problem: our hearts are corrupt. As Jeremiah says (17:9):

⁹ *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*

Dallas Willard puts it well in his book, “Renovation of the Heart”:

When the Bible talks of the deceitfulness of the human heart, we have to recognise that we are the ones spoken of. When Jesus addressed the Pharisees, he was talking to “good” people, but spoke of the filth inside them. The people Paul writes about are everybody, us included. This is a blow to our self esteem because, realistically, I’m not okay and you’re not okay. We are in serious trouble. That must be our starting point. Self esteem in such a situation will only breed self-deception and frustration. Reality will assert itself, regardless of what we or others say to “pump ourselves up” and to conceal and deny who we are.

This is not, thankfully, the end of the matter. Our hearts can be renewed, we can be made right with God again – which is the whole message of the Gospel, the reason Christ died for us on the cross. Whist our trust in his death for us puts us immediately on a right footing with God, it does not immediately transform our heart from stone to flesh.

Ezekiel 11:19

¹⁹ *I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.*

This is something we need to work at and struggle with every day of our lives. Over time by God's grace our hearts and our lives will be transformed – thank God for all those inspirational lives that we can read of where he has done just that. But more likely than not the process will be gradual and painful, not least because we have to “die to self”, we have to give up the striving to get our own way, which is the root of so much sin and strife. We don't struggle at this on our own – his Holy Spirit will help transform our hearts. But we must be willing for this to happen

Perhaps we can remember that the next time we wash our hands before a meal – that we should let God cleanse our hearts of evil, so that we can enjoy true fellowship with Him.