

Hearts Cleansed First

Psalm 45:1, 7 My heart is stirring with a noble song; let me recite what I have fashioned...my tongue shall be the pen of a skilled writer. Your throne, O God, endures for ever and ever, a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your reign; you love righteousness and hate iniquity.

Introduction

We just finished discussing the text of the letter to the Ephesians where “alignment” of the inner and outer person was a core thread woven through. For the author of the letter of Ephesians, whom I refer to as Paul, the encounter with God in the event of faith rectifies and substantiates the inner person of the believer with God in the message of what Christ did in his life and death and resurrection, and which is sealed to the believer by the coming of the Holy Spirit. This “spiritual” reality is not enough for Paul, as if just being right with God on the inside is all that matters. According to the logic of Ephesians, for this inner reality to be a *real* thing it must be/come tangible and that means it must find expression in the temporal realm *through* the outer person, the body. Faith must (and wants to!) express itself through acts of love. (full stop) In other words, what is on the inside wants to find expression on the outside.

It’s not a pop-psych thing; it’s not a fad or a phase. It’s not “these kids these days!”, it’s a very important concept that must be revisited often in our lives as we grow and mature, change with new information, and after we deconstruct spiritually and intellectually, emotionally and physically. It’s such an important topic that God in Christ Jesus picks up this very concept and discusses it from a different perspective. This time, though, Jesus addresses the discrepancy between empty action toward God because of a heart that clings to human tradition.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The Pharisees and some of the scribes [from Jerusalem] questioned [Jesus], “Why do your disciples not walk according to the traditions of the priest, but eat bread with dirty hands? And [Jesus] said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it has been written, ‘This people revere me with [their] lips but their heart keeps far off from me. In vain they worship me, teaching the teachings of the

precepts of humanity.’ Leaving the commands of God, you hold fast the traditions of humanity.”

Mark opens chapter 7 with *the local pharisees coming together with some of the scribes having arrived from Jerusalem*.¹ Here we, the audience, are being introduced to the building crisis and intensifying controversy between Jesus and the established leadership of Israel.² Not just the local leadership is worried, but the larger leadership is worried; so Jerusalem dispatched a group of scribes to see about this Jesus and his claims and actions.³ As the two groups (the Pharisees and Jerusalem scribes) come together they take notice that Jesus’s disciples *eat bread with unclean hands—that is, unwashed*. This small oversight on the part of the disciples sparks pharisaic and scribal attention because, as Mark parenthetically explains to us, *for the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they might carefully wash [their] hands, holding fast to the tradition of the priest; and they do not eat unless they ritually wash themselves also from the market...* According to Mark, there is a human-made⁴ tradition demanding hands (and bodies from the market!) are thoroughly cleansed before consuming food. Even more, anything to do with food should be *baptized* (washed thoroughly): *winecups, pitchers, copper*

¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 276. “...not the local scribal leadership but...a delegation ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων.”

² France, *Mark*, 276. “With the beginning of chapter 7 we return to a situation of controversy and of teaching, the two closely woven together. Opposition and rejection have of course been recurrent themes in the Galilean ministry so far, but with this new pericope the tension between Jesus and the religious leadership rises to a new of mutual repudiation, and Jesus deliberately fuels the fire with a more radical pronouncement even than his controversial comments on the sabbath (vv. 15, 19).”

³ France, *Mark*, 280. “The fact that in both instances they are described as having arrived ...from Jerusalem probably indicates that they have come specially to investigate and/or to dispute with Jesus.”

⁴ France, *Mark*, 280. “...it is the behaviour of Jesus’ disciples rather than his own actions which provides the point of dispute...The issue this time...is not one of obedience to the OT laws, but of rules subsequently developed in Pharisaic circles. While no doubt it could normally be expected that hands would be washed before a meal for hygienic reasons (since food was often taken from a common dish), the only hand washing required in the OT for purposes of ritual purity is that of priests before offering sacrifice...The extension of this principle to the eating of ordinary food and to Jewish people other than priests, was a matter of scribal development, and it is uncertain how far it had progressed by the time of Jesus.”

vessels, and couches. The desire is to prevent something external and unclean from contaminating the person on the inside. So, seeing the disciples break such a tradition—running the risk of making themselves unclean—provokes the Pharisees and the scribes to question Jesus, “*Why do your disciples not walk according to the traditions of the priests, but eat bread with unclean hands?*” As Jesus is pulled into the crisis, this rather small oversight becomes a much bigger deal.⁵

The reason why this small oversight becomes significant is because it marks a very early departure of Jesus’s followers from the traditions of the priests, a departure which will become—over time—more radical.⁶ Jesus takes hold of the conversation and moves it away from the banality of tradition-obedience and toward something much more significant: inner-person and outer-person alignment and obedience to God.⁷ Jesus begins by calling them hypocrites and then quoting Isaiah, “*Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as is has been written, ‘This people revere me with [their] lips but their heart keeps far off from me. In vain they worship me, teaching the teachings of the precepts of humanity.’*” And then concludes, “*Leaving the commands of God, you hold fast the traditions of humanity.*” In other words, Jesus has turned (flipped?) the table on the Pharisees and Jerusalem scribes: it is not my disciples who have left the true tradition of reign of God; it is you who have left God as you cling to traditionalism of the kingdom of humanity.⁸ According to Jesus, the existing leadership of the

⁵ France, *Mark*, 277. “While the issue raised by the scribes in v. 2 is at the relatively inoffensive level of ritual washing before meals (a matter on which Jews themselves held different views), by his pronouncement in v. 15 Jesus deliberately widens the discussion to include this ritual separation which constituted one of the ‘badges’ of Jewish national identity.”

⁶ France, *Mark*, 277. The hand washing is smallish but ends up being the catalyst for the “stark polarisation of views which must pit Jesus’ new teaching irrevocably against current religious orthodoxy, and which will, in the fulness of time, lead the community of his followers outside the confines of traditional Judaism altogether.”

⁷ France, *Mark*, 283. “Jesus’ response will therefore focus on this more fundamental issue of the relative authority of tradition as such as a guide to the will of God, rather than on the provenance of the particular tradition in question.”

⁸ France, *Mark*, 285. “The basic charge is economically expressed by means of three contrasting pairs of words: ἀφέντες...κρατεῖτε; ἐντολήν...παράδοσιν; θεοῦ...ἀνθρώπων. The fundamental contrast is the last—true religion is focused on God, not a merely human activity. What comes from God has the authoritative character of ἐντολή, which requires obedience; what comes

children of Israel have allowed God's commands to slip away as they grabbed onto the traditions of humanity. *They* are the ones who are now caught in dissonance: they say they love God but their actions demonstrate that they love their own traditions more. Something is askew.

Then, according to our assigned text, Jesus turns to *the crowd*, and draws them into the discussion, leaving the Pharisees and Jerusalem scribes to their own thoughts, *"Listen to me all [of you] and understand, nothing from outside of a person is able to make them unclean by entering into them. Rather, it is that which proceeds out of/is spoken by a person which makes the person unclean.* Jesus addresses the crowd because what is at stake exceeds *just* washing one's hands according to the traditions of human beings; what is at stake is one's orientation toward God (inward) and, thus, one's orientation toward the neighbor (outward).⁹ Building from the Isaiah quotation, Jesus recenters the state of the inner person (the heart) as the most important thing, as the seat of what defiles or does not defile a person.¹⁰ It's not a dirty pitcher or dirty hands that makes one unclean, it's what is produced from the heart and finds its way out that makes someone unclean. Thus, why Jesus then says, *For it is from within the heart of the person that the bad reasonings bursts forth....all these wicked things burst forth from within and pollute the person.* In other words, you can be as ritually pure according to tradition as you want—avoiding this or that thing, person, or deed—but if your heart is still far from God then none of it matters because you are still unclean and exposes that you've never been thoroughly washed (baptized), from

from human authority is merely παράδοσις, which may or may not be of value in itself, but cannot have the same mandatory character. Yet they have held fast to the latter, while allowing the former to go by default."

⁹ France, *Mark*, 286. "Indeed, the Pharisees and scribes are not mentioned again; their accusation has been rebutted, and now Jesus takes the imitative in raising publicly a much more fundamental issue of purity which goes far beyond the limited question of the validity of the scribal rules for hand washing. No specific regulation is now in view, but rather the basic principle of defilement by means of external contacts which underlies all the purity laws of the To and of scribal tradition."

¹⁰ France, *Mark*, 291. "Unlike the things which do not defile because they do not make contact with the καρδιά, the really defiling things are those which actually originate *in* the καρδιά."¹⁰ The seat of thought and will

head to toe.¹¹ You can say you are worshipping God and love God all you want, but your actions (toward your neighbor) will speak otherwise because what's on the inside always wants to find expression on the outside. For Mark's Jesus, clinging to traditionalisms in the name of God reveal the heart that is turned away from the neighbor because it cannot see the oppression and marginalization being imposed on the people who are just trying to live to the best of their ability. In other words, for Jesus, the Pharisees and the scribes from Jerusalem have forsaken the mission of the reign of God and have invested in the tyranny of the kingdom of humanity; God's divine revolution of love, life, and liberation is being ignored (at best) and hindered (at worst).

Conclusion

According to Mark's Jesus, our hearts must first be made right before we can begin to align the outer person with the inner person in a way that conforms with God's will and the mission of the reign of God. Our hearts are repeatedly tempted to return to the ways of the kingdom of humanity, and we find ourselves lured to (re)draw lines of division between the "acceptable" and "unacceptable," the "good" and the "bad," the "clean" and the "unclean."¹² (Remember, according to Ephesians, humans love a good dividing wall and God loves unity.) So, Mark's Jesus is asking us—challenging us, inviting us¹³—to reevaluate and take stock of these tendencies and to align our bodily expressions to our faith, our auditory words to God's Word residing in our hearts, to recenter in our lives and loves those who have been otherwise left out and oppressed by the dominant culture of the kingdom of humanity (people of color, queer people, indigenous people, people who are disabled, our elders, women, etc.). We must take a deep, hard look at the ways we've participated in forcing obedience to external conformity

¹¹ William C. Placher, *Mark*, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, eds Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher. (Louisville: WJK, 2010), 102. "The challenge is not to particular details of traditional purity laws but to the whole idea that 'purity' means keeping your distance from unclean persons, things, and types of food."

¹² Placher, *Mark*, 103. "Worry about your own attitudes and behavior, not how you might look to others if they see you associating with the wrong people. There are no 'wrong people' when it comes to those Christians should care about."

¹³ Placher, *Mark*, 104. "Jesus invites us to let all our respectability be burned away so that nothing will distinguish us from the freaks and lunatics, and only thus to enter his reign."

on those who look different from us, act different from us, and who walk through the world differently from us, and really see how we have refused to let them be who they are inside and out, how we have denied their bodies, their stories, and their religions in the world. Our histories expose that our hearts have been far from God—calcified, cold, and dead—even though we have convinced ourselves we acted and proclaimed in God’s will and name! We must take our inner and outer alignment seriously—for Jesus is speaking to us and not “them out there” who are getting it wrong according to our books. We must begin to realize we’ve conflated the goals of our human empire for the mission of the reign of God. And it is “We” because we are being addressed, those who claim to represent God by bearing Christ’s name into the world and those who claim to participate in God’s mission of divine revolution of life, love, and liberation in the world by the leading of the Spirit.