

The Heart of the Problem

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Mark 7:14-23

Last Sunday in our study we saw Jesus take the scribes and Pharisees to task. The issue that sparked the controversy was that the religious leaders witnessed some of Jesus' disciples eating without first washing their hands. Seeing it as a perfect opportunity to back Jesus into a corner, they asked, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" Mark 7:5. It wasn't that Jesus' disciples broke the Law; rather, they broke the tradition of the elders. Jewish religious leaders, over time, had developed an incredibly sophisticated external religious system with literally hundreds of requirements that had to be met in order to please God.

You see, the problem with the Pharisees is that they were so preoccupied with how they appeared on the outside that they completely neglected the inner man – the heart. Jesus called them hypocrites. They were simply reading the script and playing the religious part. Speaking of the scribes and Pharisees, in verses 6-7, Jesus said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." He said the same thing in different language in Matthew 23:25-26, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean." To use a modern idiom, the scribes and Pharisees were simply putting lipstick on a pig. They were going through the motions of worship without a heart of worship. God calls this worthless worship. The Pharisees, though they were well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures, had forgotten 2 Samuel 16:7, "For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

Spiritual traditions aren't inherently evil. We all have them. Why do you dress the way you do when you come to worship? Why do you posture yourself the way you do in worship? Do you raise your hands or keep them at your side? Do you stand or do you sit? Do you close your eyes or keep them open? The list could go on and on. The problem isn't necessarily the traditions. The problem arises when the traditions, instead of being an *expression* of your faith, become the *foundation* of your faith. Such is the case of the Pharisees. In our text this morning, Jesus teaches us that it's not our hands that need cleaning; rather, it's our hearts. Let's turn our attention to our text. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following words:

And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." And when he had entered the house and left the people, his

disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." Mark 7:14–23

Brothers and sisters, "The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever" Isaiah 40:8.

I. SIN AFFECTS OUR ABILITY TO HEAR AND UNDERSTAND SPIRITUAL TRUTH (v. 14)

And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand:

As Jesus confronted the Scribes and Pharisees in verses 1-13, you can imagine the ears of the surrounding crowd perked up to listen in. After Jesus said all He's going to say to the religious elite, at least for the time being, He turns his attention to the crowd. He calls them to Himself so that He can teach them an important lesson. He addresses them saying, "Hear me, all of you, and understand..." It's interesting to note that the language Jesus employs here is reflective of the way Old Testament prophets would address the people when they had a revelatory word from Yahweh. Jesus' call to the people to "hear" and "understand," likewise, indicates that what He is about to say is of revelatory significance and therefore it demands diligent reflection.

The problem is that sin is an insidious disease. It pervades every human faculty and infects every fiber of our being. It ruins the heart, the will, the conscience, the mind, the memory, and the understanding. The person who is quick and clever in worldly things will often fail to understand the simplest of spiritual truths. To the lost, spiritual truths sound antithetical to reality and therefore foolishly unreasonable. But the problem isn't contained in the message; it is contained in the hearer. That's why Paul says, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" 1 Corinthians 1:18. Just three verses later Paul said, "The world [does] not know God through [its] wisdom" 1 Corinthians 1:21. It hears, but darkened and diluted as the mind is because of sin, it doesn't understand. If the ear is to hear and the mind is to understand, we are dependent upon the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit. We call this inability to understand spiritual truth the noetic (mind / intellect) effect of the fall. Sin, cherished, will keep you from hearing and understanding Jesus' words this morning.

II. JESUS TURNS OUR DISTORTED THEOLOGY INSIDE OUT (v. 15-19)

There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him. And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

Five times in these 10 verses we see the word "defile". It means to be dirty, unclean, impure, corrupt, and unacceptable. Purity is a huge issue in the Bible. It's a huge issue because it has to do with how we relate to God. God is pure – He is holy. Habakkuk, speaking about God says, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil" Habakkuk 1:13. For the remainder of the text, Jesus will seek to correct the distorted theology that impurity comes from the outside.

A. The problem isn't on the outside (v. 15)

There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.

To the Jews, eating forbidden or defiled foods (of which there were many) contaminated a person and necessitated a cleansing bath according to Old Testament Law (Leviticus 17:15). However, Jesus reversed their thinking. Jesus declared that it wasn't outside impurities that contaminate the inside, but rather inside impurities that contaminate the outside. I mentioned last week that Jewish religious tradition taught that flat surfaces were normally clean while hollow spaces or interior spaces (receptacles) were more susceptible to defilement and thus most in need of cleansing. Here in verse 15, Jesus brilliantly applies the teaching of receptacle defilement to people. In other words, saying, "If the inside of a receptacle is contaminated it, how much more the inside of a person?"

Matthew's parallel account of this story (15:12) adds, "Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" Of course they were offended. Jesus had just negated their entire system of morality – their system of trying to please God with merely externals. The same is true of individuals today. Tell a man that he is not intrinsically good and that his attempts to please a Holy God with his own righteousness are futile – it's like poking at a hornet's nest. But Jesus isn't concerned with garnering a good reputation from those who would reject the truth.

What Jesus announced in verse 15 is not a new teaching; it has been true throughout the ages. In every period of history, true holiness has always been a matter of the heart; a right relationship with God comes through faith. Moses made it clear that God wants love and obedience to come from the heart, not merely from outward observance of rules and regulations. He said, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your

heart and with all your soul and with all your might” Deuteronomy 6:4–5. Just a few chapters later in Deuteronomy 10:12 He said it again, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” You see, the ancient ritual regulations and dietary guidelines outlined in the Levitical Law served as sign or a shadow of a more profound interior purification – purification of the heart.

For those of us who are on point this morning, you might be wondering why verse 16 doesn’t appear in your Bible. Some manuscripts add verse 16, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear,” but the earliest and most reliable manuscripts don’t contain this statement, so most of our modern translations leave it out and footnote it instead. Having said that, its inclusion doesn’t alter the flow or theology of the text. It actually echoes Jesus’ statement in verse 14, “Hear me, all of you, and understand.”

Look at verse 17. Mark writes, “And when He had entered the house (presumably Peter’s house) and left the people, His disciples asked Him about the parable.” What is a parable? A parable is simply a story or any illustration that is full of meaning, which is often not immediately apparent. This pattern of public parable and then private interpretation to His disciples was characteristic of Jesus’ teaching ministry. The disciples struggled to understand the meaning of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus lovingly chides them in verse 18 and asks, “Are you also without understanding?” Despite their privileged relationship to Jesus, they aren’t fundamentally different from the crowd. They have been deeply influenced by the legalistic rules and regulations taught by the religious leaders. The disciples had been brought up under the strict Jewish dietary code that categorized foods as being either clean or unclean. Peter, long after hearing Jesus’ teaching here in Mark 7, later in Acts 10, still struggled with the idea that impurity was a matter of the heart and not external contaminants. Luke writes in Acts 10:10-16:

And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

For illustration purposes, the disciples are like a dog which stares at the pointed finger of its master rather than the object to which the finger points.¹ And so Jesus further explains the parable in

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 212.

verses 18-19 saying, “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from the outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?”

Jesus is making crystal clear the fact that food which enters into a person can’t defile him (make him unclean), because it doesn’t enter the heart. It comes in, but it passes through. Sin, on the other hand, originates in the heart and remains; it produces impurity and death. When Jesus speaks about the heart, He is referring not to the location of our feelings, but rather to the seat of the human will. The heart is the Grand Central Station, nucleus, foci, hub of man’s inner life and therefore the source of human motivations and actions. Jesus is putting his finger on the core of man. It’s our hearts that are defiled, dirty, unclean, impure, corrupt, and unacceptable. The problem isn’t on the outside; the enemy is within.

B. The Enemy is within (v.20)

And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him.

Jesus connects the true source of defilement or impurity, not rules and regulations concerning clean and unclean foods, but rather to an unclean heart. Observing the Levitical dietary laws could never remove the pollution that resides in the human heart – not because the commandments were flawed, but because we are flawed and can’t keep them perfectly - without error.

Jesus asserts that the origin of impurity is *inside* and not *outside*. All the hardware to produce impurity is resident in you from birth. Parents know this well... We don’t have to teach our children to lie, to blame, to be selfish, to be disobedient, to be deceitful, to have a deserving mentality, to be arrogant, to be angry, to argue and complain, to worship things rather than God, to be jealous, to be unkind, or to be unthankful. We are born sinful (cf. Psalm 51:5) and every expression of sin can be traced back to a heart that has been dominated by the effects of the fall. J.C. Ryle wrote these penetrating words:

Our original sinfulness and natural inclination to evil are seldom sufficiently considered. The wickedness of men is often attributed to bad examples, bad company, peculiar temptations, or the snares of the devil. It seems forgotten that every man carries within him a fountain of wickedness. We need no bad company to teach us, and no devil to tempt us, in order to run into sin. We have within us the beginning of every sin under heaven.²

² J.C. Ryle, Mark: Expository Thoughts in the Gospels (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 112.

III. OUR HEARTS ARE MORE WICKED THAN WE EVER DARED TO BELIEVE (v. 21-23)

For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

Jeremiah reminds us, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it” Jeremiah 17:9. The list in verses 21-23 show just how sick our hearts really are. Like a sewer that backs up and overflows its foul contents, so our hearts overflow its wicked contents.

We need to understand that Jesus isn’t talking about the notorious sinner in verses 21-23 – the wicked man or woman whom we all know – He is taking aim at *our* heart. The seeds of every sin listed in verses 21-23 are already resident and lurking in each of our hearts. All of us by nature have the very heart that Jesus describes here. The seeds of these evils may lie dormant, kept at bay by the fear of consequences, the opinions of others, the dread of discovery, the desire to be thought of as respectable, and above all the restraining grace of God. But be not mistaken that every one of these evils exists in your heart and mine. If you think it isn’t so, it’s because sin has affected your ability to hear and understand truth (v.14).

As we look at verses 21-23 there is a definite pattern in the Greek. The first six terms occur in the plural, denoting evil *acts* while the last six terms occur in the singular, denoting evil *attitudes*.³ It’s interesting to note that Mark begins this list of sin in the human heart with evil thoughts. Why do you suppose evil thoughts might lead the list? Evil thoughts are the parent of evil words and deeds. In other words, sin is always entertained as a possibility before it is ever acted on as a reality. In biblical counseling we say, “We do what we do because we think what we think.” All sin is first conceived in the mind and then it is acted on. Let’s look briefly at this smattering of the numerous ways in which the human heart expresses its fallen nature.

SINFUL ACTS:

1. Sexual immorality	Porneia - Broad term encompassing all sexual sin.
2. Theft	Taking what rightfully belongs to another.
3. Murder	We can’t forget Matthew 5:21-22.
4. Adultery	We can’t forget Matthew 5:27-28.
5. Coveting	This is the lustful appetite for what belongs to others. It’s a compound word in the Greek and literally means eager for more. This is the heart of man who sees happiness in things rather than in God – we are all guilty.

³ James R. Edwards, 213.

6. Wickedness	It's the Greek word <i>Poneria</i> . It occurs in the plural in the original language, literally "wickednesses". This describes the person who is not content in his own sin, but encourages others to sin as well. Interestingly enough <i>Poneros – the Evil One</i> - is one of the titles given to Satan.
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SUNFUL ATTITUDES:

1. Deceit	Literally crafty, cunning and duplicitous. It has the idea of baiting others.
2. Sensuality	This word refers to open and unashamed sin. It's the unbridled, unrestrained attitude that says, "I will do as I please and I don't care who knows about it or what they may think about it!"
3. Envy	The original word here literally means "evil eye". It was a Jewish expression for stinginess. Envy jealously looks at the blessings of another and desires them for itself. It burns at the thought of others prospering.
4. Slander	This is the Greek <i>blasphemia</i> . It refers to blaspheming the name and majesty of God, or speaking ill of others.
5. Pride	Selfish arrogance. This is the person who has contempt for everyone but himself. Literally means to "show yourself above others". It can be overt or covert – always comparing yourself to others.
6. Foolishness	It means thoughtless, senseless, and reckless. Not because of lack of knowledge, but because of sinful desire. Foolishness is descriptive of the person who is morally and spiritually insensitive. He doesn't know God nor he does he wish to know God.

The list before us ought to humble us to the core. We are all unclean (Isaiah 64:6) and ruined (Isaiah 6:5) as we stand before a Holy God. He sees in us, with exacting precision, the countless evils, which the world never sees. Every sinful motive we delusionally think remains cloaked in the darkness of secrecy, He sees in full and unerring light. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, "No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" Hebrews 4:13. This list is an indictment, but it's also a summons to the cross.

How thankful we ought to be for the gospel when we consider such a heinous list of sins. The gospel of Jesus Christ contains complete provision for the wickedness that resides in our hearts. We are utterly defiled, not because of that which is on the outside, but because of the very heart that resides on the inside. Thanks be to God that He would turn a gracious eye on such a wretched sinner as I. Thanks be to God that He would deliver me from this body of death by subjecting His Son to the penalty of death (Romans 7:24).

The Pharisees thought they had hearts of gold. They thought their rigorous adherence to their self-made standards made them clean and acceptable to God. This is the ever-constant whisper of Satan, "God will accept you, just do your best." But Jesus' words in verses 21-23 serve as a sweeping indictment to the depravity and darkness that resides in our hearts apart from His redeeming grace. You see, apart from Christ, this list doesn't just describe what you *do*, it describes who you *are*.

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THESE EVIL HEARTS

The world says education, culture, and social reform are the cure for the human heart. The problem is that this cure is built upon a faulty anthropology. Remember, the problem isn't on the outside, the enemy is within. There is no power in the world that can make a bad heart good. There is only one hope for our wickedly sick hearts. That hope is the transformative power of a crucified, resurrected Savior. It is only when the Holy Spirit comes in and takes up residency in our hearts that we have any hope of real, lasting, true, heart change. In other words, regeneration is the only answer for the ills of verses 21-23. It is only after a person receives a regenerated heart that he can begin to think and act in God-honoring ways. Paul, speaking about his change in Romans 12:1-2 says:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The word translated "transformed" in the Greek word is the word from which we get our English word metamorphosis. It literally means "to be changed from the *inside out*." Rules of behavior and conduct have their place. The problem is when those rules and regulations become for us a substitute for true holiness, which only God can produce in the heart of a man or woman. It is possible to be very religious and very lost at the same time. Paul, in 2 Timothy, writes about those who have the appearance of godliness, but deny its power (2 Timothy 3:5). What about you? Have you come to Christ in humble faith and repentance? Have you been given a new heart? Or are you, like the Pharisees, too busy trying to put lipstick on a pig - too busy washing the outside of the tomb and neglecting the dead man that exists inside. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" John 10:10.

CLOSING BENEDICTION

As we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning, hear these words from David, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!" Psalm 51:10, 2. And all God's people said, "Amen!" Go in peace!