

*Where we start . . .*

Perhaps you've heard the remark: "It's the thought that counts." What does that really mean?

Where have you experienced being left wondering what the "thought" was that was behind the action?

*What we read . . .*

As Jesus continues His teaching ministry, He is confronted by some religious leaders. This opens up a discussion about "traditions." We pick up this exchange in Mark 7:1-23.

What do you think makes up "the tradition of the elders"?

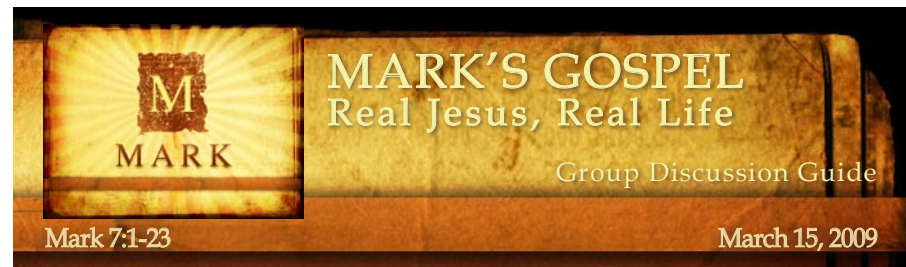
What is Jesus' concern with such tradition?

After specifically addressing some examples of these traditions, Jesus goes on to talk about clean and unclean food. What point is He seeking to make in His discussion about what "goes into a person" and what "comes out of a person"?

Although at first it might seem that these thoughts of Jesus are merely a string of random kinds of thoughts, they are "bookended" by a common idea. What key concept is underscored by both the quote from Isaiah (Mark 7:6) and Jesus' closing words of explanation (7:21)?

*Why this matters . . .*

Clearly, we don't maintain the same "tradition of the elders" that gave rise to the problems Jesus speaks to here. Nevertheless, we have to address the "issue of the heart" that really is the key to Jesus' concerns. Why is it that He wants them (and you!) to look closely at what's going on in the heart?



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*Diving in . . .*

Controversy has been growing with the religious leaders. And now they press Jesus in confronting Him. This gives rise to Jesus' response that what really is most important is overlooked by the religious—the heart! Apparently, they thought that if they got the outside right everything was right. But Jesus makes it clear that such is not the case—neither with them or for us!

*Discussing . . .*

It's commonly said: "It's the thought that counts." What people seem to mean by that is that if there is some seeming incongruency in what someone does, what really matters is what is going on in his or her heart. And, to a large degree, Jesus agrees (as we shall see). The opening questions simply seek to surface the idea that we already recognize—that what is going on inside someone may, in fact, be different than what is going on outside.

Jesus' exchange with the religious leaders begins with a debate about "washings." That may need a bit of explaining.

The Pharisees were the "pietists" of the day; they wanted to preserve both religious and cultural traditions in the face of the influence of Rome. They adopted a wide variety of "oral laws" that they hoped would help them better preserve and follow the written Law of the Scriptures; but, unfortunately, their traditions often got in the way of what God's Law was really after. In the Old Testament (Exodus 30:19; 40:12), instructions were given for priests to ceremonially wash before they served in the Temple. The Pharisees, in a misguided desire to preserve their personal holiness before God, adopted instructions about regular "washings" built upon such instructions. In a sense, they concluded that since washing preserved the holiness of the priests, it would be good for all to live in such holy ways, even if they weren't specifically serving at the Temple.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees' concerns about His disciples' washings (or lack thereof) by quoting Isaiah and raising the concern of hypocrisy. What does Jesus have in mind? Perhaps the Pharisees were troubled by the disciples having both received graciously the provision made for them on their "mission journey" (6:7-13) and the crowds having participated in the miraculous meal (6:39-44). Such occasions would have hardly even given an opportunity for "ritual washing." In any case, these religious leaders were

making much of their interpretations and expansions on the Law rather than making much of what God wanted (which was, after all, what Jesus was all about). So their posturing as holy people was hypocritical.

Jesus offers an even more pointed example of this kind of hypocrisy—the tradition of the elders referred to as "Corban." In Leviticus and Numbers, references can be found to setting something aside as an offering to God; the Hebrew word *qorban* is used in these settings. That which was so set aside, was removed from its ordinary use and treated as if it now belonged to God *even if the item(s) was not actually sacrificed in the temple*. So, in the example Jesus cited, if a son either didn't want to be of help to his parents or merely was inattentive to his parents, he could pledge his possessions to the temple (while still enjoying the use of them until he passed away) but would be absolved from using any of those "promised" resources to help his parents, in spite of the fact that the call to honor one's parents was God's call while the "rules" of Corban were traditions advanced by rabbis. In Mark 7:13, Jesus says two startling things. First, such "traditions" make void (treat as worthless) God's commands; second, this example is only one of "many such things" that the religious were doing.

Lastly, Jesus turns His attention to the matter of "uncleanliness" and food. Drawing on passages like Leviticus 11:1-47 and Deuteronomy 14:1-10, the rabbis advanced teaching on all categories of "clean" and "unclean" foods. They ended up functionally teaching that "cleanliness" or holiness before God was achievable by keeping certain rules. If only one did the right things, one would be holy before God.

Where is all this discussion going? If we follow Jesus' train of thought, it becomes clear. Jesus is contrasting externals to internals.

The tradition of the elders came to focus on externals and behavior. They were concerned about external cleaning, which never could reach the heart. Jesus is concerned about what is in the heart, which really is what defiles a person. They privileged their traditions, rules that they extrapolated from the Scriptures that they were able to manage. Jesus privileged what God was really after, reflected in the Scriptures.

What is Jesus, ultimately, after in the comments He makes here? He wants to call their attention (and ours) to what matters most: *What is going on in our hearts!* It might be easy to get bogged down in discussing the fine points of Kosher food laws and what the details of ceremonial washing were. But that would end up leveraging these words of Jesus in the wrong direction.

As your group works its way through the passage, try and tie 7:6 and 7:21 together: if the heart is far from God then what comes out of the heart will be defiling. So, the real issue is, "How can we cultivate hearts that are close to God?" If our hearts are close to Him, then what comes out of our hearts and lives will be pleasing to God, will be good, will honor Him!