

CLEAN HANDS OR A CLEAN HEART

Mark 7:1-23

Introduction:

Tradition – 1964 Broadway musical “Fiddler on the Roof” – made into a screen film in 1971. I remember renting and watching the movie many years ago. Then, just a couple of years ago it was shown on TV and we recorded it and watched it again. The movie takes place in a Jewish community in czarist Russia and it opens with Tevye, the leading character, singing the song, Tradition! The whole Jewish community was built upon and governed by the long-standing, unbreakable traditions of the past. The unspoken thesis of the play and movie is the way these traditions were being challenged by the unrest and turbulence of the day, and that to violate tradition causes grief and hardship.

In today’s Scripture text, we find Jesus coming into direct conflict with the traditions of the Jewish leaders of his day. His teaching and actions went against the traditions and were causing great consternation for the Pharisees and scribes. He was upsetting the applecart and they did not like it. But Jesus’ response to them pointed out the hypocrisy of these leaders who were so concerned about what Jesus and his disciples were doing.

“Hypocrisy” - That word comes to us from the ancient Greek language. It was used to describe actors in a play. Ancient actors would carry different masks in their hands as they acted. The masks were attached to sticks and could be held before the face as needed. A smiling mask suggested humor, a frowning mask suggested sadness, etc. These actors were called the “**hypocritas**,” a word that suggests the idea of “**one who wears a mask.**” We use the word today to refer to people who pretend to be one thing when they are actually something else. For example, people who live one way at church and another way at home are hypocrites.

Hypocrites are nothing new. Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, because of the way they focused on outward rituals and

keeping the traditions of their forefathers, even while their hearts were filled with darkness and wickedness.

In our text today, Jesus had another confrontation with some of these hypocritical Jewish leaders who have come from Jerusalem to look into what he was doing. They attacked Jesus because his disciples were eating food without performing the traditional ceremonial washing first. They were concerned with clean hands, but Jesus soon points out to them and to us that the real issue is clean hearts.

As we look at this text this morning, I hope that we too will learn that the biggest problem we face is not what we are on the outside, but rather what we are on the inside. Jesus lesson in this passage is that true defilement comes from the inside, from what is in our heart, not from the outside.

Let’s go through the text and let the Word of God speak to us this morning.

The Challenge vv. 1-5

Go through the context:

- Delegation of scribes came from Jerusalem, probably requested by the Galilean Pharisees.
- Hands that were defiled – unclean, common, unholy. They were ceremonially unclean, which, in the eyes of the Pharisees, would defile the food they were eating.

This was no ordinary or casual washing. John MacArthur describes it like this: “*This washing had nothing to do with cleaning dirty hands but with a ceremonial rinsing. The ceremony involved someone pouring water out of a jar onto another’s hands, whose fingers must be pointing up. As long as the water dripped off at the wrist, the person could proceed to the next step. He then had water poured over both hands with the fingers pointing down. Then each hand was to be rubbed with the fist of the other hand.*”

It is said that one Jewish rabbi was arrested by the Romans and nearly died in prison because he used up his daily ration of water trying to wash his hands after the prescribed manner.

- Verses 3-4 explain the Pharisees obsession with the traditions of washing and cleansing. Quote – Alan Carr – *“According to Mark, they not only had rules about their hands, they also had elaborate rules about washing pots, pans, plates, etc. In all, the Jewish **Mishnah**, a compilation of Jewish oral laws made around 200 AD has over 35 pages of instructions devoted to washing alone.”*
- The problem was that all these rules did not come from God, but were *“...**the tradition of the elders.**”*

One writer says this about the traditions of the elders: *“The **‘traditions of the elders’** came into being with good intentions. The **Mishnah** says that **‘tradition is a fence around the Law.’** In an effort to protect the Law from people, the ancient Jews added to that Law. They added restrictions that went beyond the letter of the Law. The Jewish leaders believed that their traditions helped people keep the Law better and they believed their traditions protected the Law from the people.”*

So, they established lists of rules and regulations to make sure that no one accidentally came to close the edge and transgressed the Law—rules about how much you could carry on the Sabbath, and how far you could walk, and how to wash so you were ceremonially clean...

Application – we still have Pharisees with us today—people who want to impose rules: how you can dress, where you can go, or what you can do. Certainly, there are things that God has clearly condemned as being wrong, but beyond that we need to weigh everything in our own conscience and in the light of God’s Word and the leading of God’s Spirit.

So, the question of the Pharisees and scribes – v. 5. The word used is “unwashed,” but clearly they are implying that the disciples hands are defiled, unholy.

The Condemnation vv. 6-13

So how does Jesus respond to these religious leaders who are so upset that his disciples are not performing the ritual washings? He very quickly reveals the hypocrisy that is in their hearts.

The first thing Jesus attacked was their legalistic attitude. He quoted Isaiah 29:13 – *read vv. 6-7.* He goes on to say – *read vv. 8-9.*

Do you see the accusation he is leveling against them? He says they have raised their traditions to the point that they carry more weight than the Word of God. History shows that this is exactly what happened. According to Warren Wiersbe, *“Rabbi Eleazer said, ‘He who expounds the Scriptures in opposition to the tradition has no share in the world to come.’ The Mishna, a collection of Jewish traditions in the Talmud, records, ‘It is a greater offense to teach anything contrary to the voice of the Rabbis than to contradict Scripture itself.’”*

Do you hear what that is saying? It is better to contradict the Scripture than to contradict the tradition and teaching of the Rabbis. That is the accusation Jesus is making against these Pharisees and scribes – *read v. 9 again.*

There are still those with us today that would put their rules and traditions ahead of the commands of God. They believe that if the dress right and wear their hair right, and stay away from certain places, they will be right with God. That is legalism and is no different than the Pharisees of Jesus’ day.

But there is more-not only legalism. He also condemns the license and liberties they take with the Law. Jesus points out a specific tradition they use to avoid keeping the Law – the practice of “Corban.”

What is “Corban?” The word means “a gift offered (or to be offered) to God. These Jewish religious leaders used this practice to get around one of the clear commandments of the Law. The fifth commandment says, *“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”* (Ex 20:12 ESV) And in Exodus 21:17, it says, *“Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.”*

Alan Carr says it this way: *“Part of this idea of honoring one’s parents included the necessity of providing for their needs as long as they lived. Most of us still believe in that today. Well, the Jews found a way around it. If they said that their money or possessions was **‘Corban – a gift offered to God.’** They could only use that money or goods in sacred matters. Thus, they were off the hook regarding the care of their parents. They would just tell Mom and Dad that their stuff was dedicated to*

the Lord and they wouldn't be getting anything. Talk about cold hearts! Jesus tells them that they have made the Laws of God ineffective by their traditions, v. 13."

Isn't it amazing how the human mind can rationalize a way around the rules. When the rules or standards become an inconvenience, people find a way around them. That's another form of hypocrisy.

The Clarification vv. 14-23

In the last few verses of this passage, Jesus gives us some important clarification on this subject. *Read vv. 14-15* – What goes into the person from the outside cannot defile a person. Eating food with unwashed hands cannot make a person spiritually defiled or unclean. Spiritual defilement is caused by the things that arise from within the heart of a person.

It seems that the disciples are somewhat confused by this. After all, they grew up with the Law, along with all the rabbinic traditions and rules – *read vv. 17-19*. As one writer said, Jesus gives them a quick lesson in anatomy. He reminds them that what goes into the body passes through the body. It goes in one end and comes out the other, but it does not affect the heart, or the inner man. It may cause sickness of the body, but it cannot cause sickness in the soul. Jesus is telling us that external things cannot cause spiritual defilement!

Read v. 20 - Here he tells us that spiritual defilement is always the result of a defiled heart. Every sin we commit, whether it is a sin of the body or of the mind, comes out of our heart. We do the things we do because of defilement within.

Jesus then gives us a list of attitudes and actions that come from our heart – things that cause spiritual defilement – *read vv. 21-23*.

You see the problem is that, even if the outside actions are right, these things will defile you—make you spiritually unclean—if they reside in your heart. Do any of those attitudes or actions, or any other evil thoughts, dwell in your heart? The things we need to realize is that we are all sinners. Every one here in this building this morning is capable of any one of these sins and many more.

Conclusion

Illust. - Once a grouchy old Deacon was teaching a boy's Sunday School class. He wanted to help them understand what a Christian was, so he asked them a question. He asked, "**Why do people call me a Christian?**" There was a moment of silence and then one of the boys said, "**Is it because they don't know you?**"

The whole point of this passage is this: ***The problem with mankind is a problem of the heart.*** Jeremiah 17:9 says, "*The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?*"

If people could see into your heart this morning, what would they see? What we need to do is look into our own hearts right now and consider what we see there. Is there anger? Lust? Pride? Hatred? Unforgiveness? Bitterness?

Whatever is in your heart is what you really are. The good news is that Jesus died to provide forgiveness for those evil thoughts, attitudes and actions which spring from an evil heart. And he has promised that when we repent and confess our sin, he will give us a new heart and replace those evil things with love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and temperance.