

Mark 7:1-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

Then he said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die." But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban" (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.'

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Psalm 51:1-3, 6-7

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we've skipped over a couple stories in order to stay in touch with the Church year. Since Jesus sent the disciples out to teach and they returned, he has miraculously fed thousands of people.<sup>1</sup> He has walked on water, and healed many sick people.<sup>2</sup>

So now he's mobbed. Everyone wants to see and hear Jesus. Some of the Pharisees have come from Jerusalem to hear what he has to say. They notice that Jesus' disciples are eating their lunch without washing their hands in the way that the Pharisees say everyone has to. They ask Jesus why his disciples eat with defiled hands.

The word that is translated "defiled" here does not mean tainted or ruined. The Pharisees are not saying that the disciples are eating with hands that are filthy, or covered in animal waste or something.

The word "defiled" here just means ordinary, not holy, not fit to worship God. It is not a crisis, everybody is quote-unquote-defiled from time to time. It is something that can be fixed with a good handwashing, but the Pharisees see Jesus' disciples eating as though it were nothing to be concerned about. So the Pharisees ask Jesus, why his disciples don't eat the way that they themselves do.

Jesus gets kind of frustrated with the Pharisees right now.

He has been teaching about the coming of the Kingdom of God. He is healing people of all sorts of illnesses. He has raised the dead, and he is casting out demons all over the place. These scholars could ask him anything they liked, and what they choose to ask him about is his disciples' eating habits?

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 6:30-34.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 6:45-56.

It is important to remember; the Pharisees mean well! They want all of Israel to be obedient to God's laws and worthy to be God's people in the world. They believe that that has to happen BEFORE the Messiah will come. They take Scripture very seriously.

The problem is that they read Scripture just as an arbitrary list of rules, without regard for why a given rule is on the list. There are six hundred and thirteen commands in the Hebrew Scriptures,<sup>3</sup> and Pharisees apply each rule in a vacuum, separate from every other rule.

They enforce every rule on the list. And then make additional rules around those rules, just to make sure that they aren't accidentally breaking a rule that is listed in Scripture. The rule that they are accusing Jesus' disciples of breaking is a rule in Exodus that says in that verse that it applies only to the priests handling sacrifices to the LORD.<sup>4</sup> This is like a nurse stopping you at the entrance of the hospital waiting room because you haven't scrubbed your hands like a surgeon before surgery.

This is where all the rules of keeping kosher come from, and why we, as Christians, are not bound by those rules. They are trying to make absolutely certain that they don't accidentally break one of God's commandments, by adding to those commandments until it's not possible.

Jesus takes a different approach to God's commandments.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613\\_commandments](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_commandments) lists them.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 30:19. This is the only one of the 613 commandments that references handwashing.

To Jesus, they're not just a list of arbitrary commands, each one independent of each of the others, and each equal in importance. Just like the Bible is not a modern scientific textbook or a modern journalistic account of history, it is not merely a list of rules like the Ohio Revised Code. It's more than that.

To Jesus, the Scriptures tell a story. The story of God's relationship with God's people. God's amazing love for God's people, and God trying to get God's people to live like they really are God's people.

All six-hundred-thirteen commands in the Hebrew Scriptures come from a single way of looking at the world. They detail what that way of looking at the world looked like at the time that they were written down. If you truly love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself,<sup>5</sup> then you will do what is good, and you will not do what is evil, just by the nature of things.

Jesus will explain this later, exactly what the core of the Law was and is and is forever. I am sure that he would explain it to the Pharisees right now, at this time, if that were what they were concerned about. But it isn't. They're concerned with playing "gotcha" games with a rule that is not the core of the law.

Washing your hands before you eat is a good idea, but it is not the core of the Law. Likewise, being careful what you eat is a good idea. Leviticus has extensive lists of what sorts of animals may be eaten and what sorts may not. Pigs are out. Cows are in. Shellfish are out. Scaly fish are in. The foods that are safe to eat in a refrigeration-challenged desert are all right. The foods that are dangerous

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 12:28-34.

to eat, due to risk of disease, parasites, or food poisoning, are off the menu.<sup>6</sup> But this is not the core of the Law.

This is not the core of what God wants us to do and to be.

Jesus does not say that the Jews should immediately abandon the Law and eat all those things that have been forbidden. He is not calling for bacon-wrapped shrimp at the bar mitzvah. What Jesus is saying is that the food we eat is not the core of the Law. A particular diet is not what makes a person worthy or unworthy to worship God.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus goes on to explain the things that defile a person, that is, make that person unworthy to worship God. These are the things that show that a person does not get their very identity, who they are, from being a Child of God. Evil intentions come from the heart, and they produce their fruits in people's lives: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly."<sup>8</sup>

These are the fruits in people's lives that demonstrate that they do not, in fact, get their identity from worshipping God.

The Pharisees have seized on just one of God's commandments in the Law, one that they understand, and they've expanded it and made it a central pillar of what they see as being a good Jew. When they did that, they put it before the purpose of the Law.

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<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 11.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 7:14; see also Acts 10:1-16.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 7:21-22, *NRSV*.

There are some Christians today who do that, I'm afraid. They pick one commandment that is not particularly a challenge for them, take it out of the context in which it was written, and make it their sole litmus test for who and what a Christian should be.

Whether that commandment is related to sexuality, or resting on the Sabbath, or refraining from shaving, it is the same thing.

It makes it very easy to feel like you are RIGHT.

It makes it very easy to say that people you don't like are WRONG.

The problem is that it's making that one command more important than God's intent. That's called idolatry.

Not one of us is Jesus.

Not one of us was there when the Law was written.

Not one of us does a perfect job of avoiding that kind of hypocrisy.

Anyone who tells you they do, should cause you to ask some uncomfortable questions.

So how do we tell?

How do we tell when we're really following God's commands to love God and love our neighbor, and when we're being hypocritical?

Look at the fruits of our actions.

Look at the results of what we say and do.

Do our words lead to more love in the world, or less? Build people up, or tear them down?

Do our actions mean that hungry people are fed, or that they go hungry? That frightened people are made safe, or that they are further terrorized?

Do we find ourselves thinking we're better than other people, because we keep the certain rules we keep, and we decide the rules we break aren't important?

Are we finding ourselves making excuses for bad behavior from one person, that we would condemn in anyone else?<sup>9</sup>

If so, we need to go back and review what we're thinking and saying and doing.

None of us follows Christ perfectly. But following Christ is not a matter of a roadmap, where, if you get off course once, you're out of luck. Following Christ is like a GPS – we all need to RECALCULATE from time to time.

That's what God's law and grace are all about.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

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<sup>9</sup> I am of course thinking of abusive pastors. Any other application I leave in the minds and hearts of the hearer.