

It's a Matter of the Heart

Our text today consists of a classic encounter between Jesus and the religious teachers of His day on the topic of traditions for ritual cleansing. The purpose of such rabbinical teachings was to enable lay people, just like the priests in the Old Testament, to enjoy intimate fellowship with the Lord. We shall see from Jesus' response that He strongly disagrees with their approach (which often approximates our own).

Mark 7:1-23

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, 2 they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, 4 and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) 5 And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6 And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;
7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'
8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

9 And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! 10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 11 But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God) — 12 then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

14 And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: 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." 17 And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18 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, 19 since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20 And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. 21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

I. From verses 21-23 we can see that Jesus teaches that outward conformity to religious tradition will never purify our hearts and thereby enable us to draw near to the Lord. We must therefore cultivate our hearts, not just our manners.

But how can we know if we are cultivating our hearts for intimate fellowship with God.

Those who cultivate their hearts for God are merciful rather than critical of others. (vv. 1-5)

Notice that the scribes are intently focused on their criticisms of Jesus and fail to notice or acknowledge the amazing things Jesus has just accomplished (in chapter 6). When our hearts are critical, we become petty and negative in our thoughts and words toward others.

Notice also that they acknowledge nothing about their own weaknesses, sins or failures. When our hearts are critical, we see the speck in another's eye but disregard the log in our own!

II. Those who cultivate their hearts for God are sincere rather than hypocritical. (vv. 6-13)

Jesus immediately calls them "hypocrites," because they are pretending to be something they are not. He then cites Is. 29:13 in reference to their behavior.

First of all (v. 6), their lips and hearts don't match up.

Secondly, (v. 7) they pretend to care about God's Word, but in reality they regularly replace God's Word with their own traditions. Jesus cites an example of how their teachings have violated the Fifth Commandment (vv. 8-13)

III. Those who cultivate their hearts for God focus on the heart. (vv. 14-23)

Jesus now turns to the crowd to explain this matter to them: uncleanness does not come from things external, but from the internal wickedness of our own hearts. Our religious traditions, therefore, will never cleanse us. They are powerless to purify us so that we can enjoy intimacy with God. Only a washing of our hearts can accomplish the cleansing we need, and this is exactly what Jesus accomplishes for us.

We then, with zeal and confidence go to the lost (unclean) world to preach, teach, touch, heal, and cleanse, that all the people's of the earth may walk intimately with God. (See 7:24ff.)

Discussion Questions

1. What are the primary differences between the scribes' view of spiritual sanctification and Jesus' view?
2. When does healthy respect for our traditions turn into unhealthy traditionalism?
3. Where do you see traditionalism at work in your own church and society? In your own heart?
4. Why does the human heart so quickly and easily embrace hypocrisy?

5. Why do human traditions have no power to change us spiritually?

6. How can we cultivate our hearts so that they consistently bear good fruit in our outward lives?

Going Deeper

What are the most frequent ways in which you pretend in your spiritual life?

How can you repent of this?