

## The Heart of the Problem

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Mark 7:14-23

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We left off in our study of the book of Mark two Sundays ago in chapter 7 verses 1-13 where Jesus took the Scribes and Pharisees to task over their burdensome, self-righteous adherence to man-made spiritual rules and regulations. The issue that sparked the controversy was that they witnessed some of Jesus' disciples eating without first washing their hands. Wanting to try and corner Jesus, that they might have reason to indict Him, they asked, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands" Mark 7:5? In the Old Testament, God gave specific dietary guidelines (Leviticus 11, Deuteronomy 14) to Israel. Certain foods were considered clean and fit for consumption while others were considered defiled or unclean and were to be avoided. But the religious elite of Jesus' day took the liberty to broaden the commandments of God. They had developed an incredibly sophisticated external religious system with literally hundreds of prescriptions that were never required by God. Illustrated in the first 13 verses of chapter 7, they taught that eating, even clean foods, with unclean hands defiled the food and therefore defiled the one who consumed it.

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. In short, they were hypocrites. In verses 6-7, Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13 and applied it to the Pharisees. He said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Rebuking the Pharisees in Matthew 23:25-26 Jesus said, "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, Jesus was saying, "Your rigorous adherence to the traditions while neglecting the heart is like putting lipstick on a pig." The Pharisees were well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures, but they 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 evil in and of themselves. 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? Why do you close your eyes when you pray? 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 for this morning, Jesus asserts 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 these 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*

## **I. SIN HAS AFFECTED OUR ABILITY TO 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 that the ears of the crowd perked up to listen in. When Jesus says all He's going to say to the religious elite, He turns his attention to the crowd and calls them together that He might give further application to the people. He addresses them saying, "Hear me, all of you, and understand..." It's interesting to note that the language that Jesus employs here is reflective of the way that 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 effect of the fall.

## II. JESUS TURNS OUR PRIM AND PROPER RELIGIOUS 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 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. As Jesus gathers the crowd to Himself, He wants them to understand:

### 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 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. It's interesting to note that rabbinic theory actually held 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 rabbinic theory of receptacle defilement to people. In other words, saying, "If it is the inside of a vessel that contaminated it, how much more the inside of a person?"

Matthew's account (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 appease 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.

It's important to note that when Jesus said, "Nothing outside a person can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defiles him," didn't alleviate the demand for purity. It actually served to sharpen the demand. What Jesus did in one sweeping statement was to attack the delusion that sinful men can attain any sense of true purity before God through scrupulous observance of purity regulations, which are powerless to cleanse the defilement of the heart.<sup>1</sup> Jesus has no intention

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 254.

of denying that the purity laws occupy a significant place in Mosaic law (Leviticus 11:1-47, Deuteronomy 14:1-20). Rather He presses home the recognition that the ultimate seat of purity or defilement before God is the heart.

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. Paul said, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" Romans 5:1. 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. Likewise, "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" Deuteronomy 10:12. You see, the ancient ritual prescriptions and dietary guidelines outlined in the Levitical law served as sign or a shadow of a more profound interior purification – purification of the heart. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of every purity law!

For those of us who can count, 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. 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 pregnant with 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 espoused 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.<sup>2</sup> And so Jesus further explains the parable in 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 that 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.*

In verse 20, Jesus makes explicit the quotation from Isaiah 29:13 in verse 15 made implicit. Remember Isaiah 29:13 says, “[These] people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me...” 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 commandments 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:

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<sup>2</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 212.

*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.*<sup>3</sup>

### **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 heinous 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 enumerated 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. Be not mistaken that every one of these evils exist in your heart. If you think it isn’t so, you are just like the Pharisees - lacking understanding.

There is a definite pattern in Greek here. The first six terms occur in the plural, denoting evil *acts* while the last six terms occur in the singular, denoting evil *attitudes*.<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>3</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Mark: Expository Thoughts in the Gospels* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 112.

<sup>4</sup> James R. Edwards, 213.

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.
6. Wickedness	It's the Greek word Poneria. 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.

SINFUL 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 Semitic 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.

## TWO PROPER RESPONSES TO SUCH A LIST OF SIN

### 1. Humility

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 indictment, but it's also a summons to the cross.

### 2. Thankfulness

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 to 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*.

The fact that this evil is resident in the human heart shatters the pervasive lie that we are basically or intrinsically good and are corrupted by society or external influences. We are not basically good; the Bible says we are by nature evil. And not only are we evil by nature, but we become insidiously wicked as we continue to rebel against God, honing our ability and desire to sin. Paul paints the devastating picture of our hearts apart from redeeming grace in Romans 3:10-18. Turn there with me for moment.

*As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

## WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THESE EVIL HEARTS

The world says education, culture, and social reform are the answer. The problem is that this cure is built upon a faulty anthropology. Remember the problem isn't on the outside, the enemy is within. Such answers to our sin problem will never bring about the heart change that we so desperately need. 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 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 to ills of verses 21-23. If the inside has been changed, cleaned by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, the outside will follow suit. Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew 23:26, "You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean."

### 1. There must be a radical new birth.

Jesus told Nicodemus, "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" John 3:3.

### 2. There must be a resurrection.

Paul said, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" Romans 6:3-4.

### 3. There must be a new creation.

Paul said, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" 2 Corinthians 5:17.

### 4. There must be a new heart.

God, speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, said, "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" Ezekiel 36:25-27.

It is only when a person is born again, resurrected to new life, a new creation with a new heart that the sanctification or transformation process begins. Apart from a new heart, every attempt to regulate morality in the human heart or modify our behavior is simply like picking apples off an apple tree. You can pick an apple tree bare of its fruit, but doing so makes no fundamental change to the tree. Apple tree is coded into the tree's DNA. Unless you deal with the tree at the root level, it will continue to produce the fruit that apple trees make. Behavior modification alone only deals with the symptoms of your true problem – your heart.

Holiness isn't first something a person *does*, but rather something a person *receives*. It is only after a person receives a regenerated heart that he can begin to think and act in holy 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.