

“The Issue is Not the Issue”

Series: Jesus and His Gospel: Studies in Mark – Part 21

Mark 7:1-13

Congregational Prayer:

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Mark 7, Mark chapter 7.

The Truman Show was a blockbuster movie that came out in 1998 in which the drama unfolds around one man – Truman Burbank. He is an especially sincere, naïve, and likeable man. He loves life and lives it to its fullest. As the plot develops it becomes clear that Truman is living his life in complete ignorance to the fact that he is the star of a reality TV show. A whole world has been crafted where everything is engineered and perfectly timed to craft the perfect world which makes up Truman’s life. Everyone is in on the drama. His parents, his wife, his neighbors, his co-workers – they are all actors playing on the stage of Truman’s life. The only one who doesn’t know that this is a made for TV production is Truman himself. The producer is convinced that real life is more appealing than a Sitcom or a movie script, and so he crafts a world in which Truman can live – completely oblivious to the fact that he is the star of a show. And this is what captures the supposed attention of the worldwide audience. This man has no idea that he is on Live TV. He has no concept that he is an actor.

In Mark 7, Jesus breaks the news to the Pharisees – you guys are a bunch of actors. They had no intention of acting. They didn’t think they were acting. Just like Truman, they were deadly serious about all that they did and taught. But in Mark 7, a group of Pharisees and Scribes – and a Scribe was a Pharisee who was especially trained in the Law of Moses – he was a Law expert – a group of these religious leaders in Israel seeks out Jesus. Most likely they are there to find more fault with his ministry. The last time Mark told us they were around Jesus they proclaimed he was possessed by Beelzebul, and Jesus responded by telling them that they had just committed the unpardonable sin. So, needless to say – when the Pharisees and Scribes from Jerusalem show up on the scene in Mark 7 the stage is set for another showdown.

Jesus wasn’t going away. He was continuing to do mighty and miraculous things, and all of the leaders were taking notice. The Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day for the Jews, and this Rabbi – this teacher – Jesus, was causing them all kinds of problems by his prolific and popular ministry. He was claiming not just to be a Rabbi, but to be the Messiah – the promised deliverer sent by God. And he was proving those claims to be truth through powerfully miraculous works. People were starting to believe in this Jesus. People were starting to follow this Jesus. People were starting to claim that he was the Messiah. And so here the religious leaders come to cast their verdict on Jesus. Is he from God or is he not? Is he the Messiah, or is he an imposter? What they find, and how they respond is found in verses 1-5 of chapter 7. Jesus’ response to them is found in verse 6 and following. Let’s start reading in Mark 7:1.

In this passage we see that the Pharisees have a problem with Jesus, and Jesus has a problem with the Pharisees. The Pharisees question about Jesus' disciples in verse 5 is basically saying – what kind of Rabbi are you? You let your disciples eat bread with unclean hands. How can you say that you are a teacher of God's people when you let this happen among your own disciples? How can you stand by and act like this is okay? This was their problem with Jesus. But Jesus' problem with the Pharisees is much more severe. They are concerned about unclean hands, but he is saying the problem is actually unclean hearts. They were saying the problem was external, but Jesus was saying it was internal. They were saying the problem was the disciples, but Jesus was saying the problem was them – the Pharisees.

Now it is really easy, as we approach passages like this, to berate the Pharisees and talk about how spiritually clueless they obviously are – and we all feel better about ourselves because, hey, at least we aren't like the Pharisees. And yet, so often we are like the Pharisees. In our sincerity and in our zealous pursuit of living lives that are pleasing to God – sometimes we get the self-righteous and self-justifying spirit of the Pharisees. Sometimes in the midst of our sincere attempts at godliness we make much out of an issue that really isn't the issue. We have the tendency deep in our sin-laden hearts to think that an issue of outward conformity to some standard is the issue, when in reality, it is not the real issue. Why do we do this? What is it about the human heart that makes us prone to thinking the issue is somehow an outward conformity issue, when in reality it is not the issue? Mark 7 answers that question through the words of Jesus to the Pharisees. In a matter of a few verses he cuts to the heart of their unclean hearts and makes known to us the nature of a hypocrite. So, why were the Pharisees hypocrites? They certainly didn't intend to be hypocrites. They didn't mean to be actors – putting on the face of one thing while actually being someone else. In their minds they were zealously pursuing God through outward conformity to the oral tradition. So, why does Jesus say they are hypocrites?

I. Because Their Honoring of God Was Completely External – vs. 6

- a. The text gives us two answers to that question. They were hypocrites because their honoring of God was completely external, and because their worship of God was completely vain. These two reasons are given in verses 6-8 as Jesus quotes from Isaiah the prophet in response to the accusing question of the Pharisees. Upon the arrival of these investigative Pharisees on the scene of Jesus' ministry they found that his disciples were eating with ceremonially unclean hands according to the tradition of the elders. In their minds, there is no way that Jesus could be the true Messiah if this is how his disciples were going to act. And so they march up to Jesus and condemn him through their question – why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" Jesus' response is to show them from the Prophet Isaiah that they themselves are hypocrites, saying one thing with their mouths while their hearts are in a totally different place.

- b. So, what were their lips saying? Well, they were saying that they were honoring God. That was the point of their entire lives. They had committed themselves to the strict observance, not just of the Law, but also of the Oral Tradition that surrounded the Law so as to be sure that they didn't even come close to the breaking of the Law. They believed these external practices of obedience were evidence of their righteous hearts that were obviously intent on honoring the God of Heaven. This outward conformity to the oral tradition was just assumed to be honoring to God. It was assumed that this was the way to please God and to gain a right standing with Him. You had to go the extra mile and do the extra deed. And so they created this system of outward action that included the constant washing of hands in a certain ceremonial way so as to wash off the filth of the common so as to be sure not to profane that which was uncommon.
- c. These external practices were not in the Law of Moses at all. Nowhere in the Old Testament does it call God's people to go through these steps of washing before they ate. Nowhere does it lay out for them the procedures for bathing after going to the marketplace, or for washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches, like it describes in verse 4. But the Torah was not considered to be enough in the way of instructions about how to honor God. The Torah, the Law of Moses, was considered by the Pharisees to be the "what" of God's Law, but it needed further explanation. It needed the "how" which explained the way to keep the "what." So, the "what" here is that God's people are to be holy like He is holy. The "what" is that God has given instructions for the Levitical priests and how they are to wash and cleanse themselves before their ministry to God in the Tabernacle or Temple. The "what" is the unclean nature of anyone who has a bodily discharge or who touches someone else with a discharge or who comes in contact with an unclean animal or a dead body. So, out of a desire to be holy and set apart as God's people all the time and out of a desire to make sure that they were never rendered ceremonially unclean they came up with this oral tradition – which they thought was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and was passed down through the elders of Israel all the way to their day – and this oral tradition told them the "how" which would enable them to keep the "what." So, if they go to the market they might come into contact with someone who has a bodily discharge and not know it, so upon coming home they were to take a ceremonially dictated bath so as to clean themselves from anything that may have been common. If they were about to eat bread, they were to wash their hands in a very specific way so as to guarantee that they were clean before they ingested any bread. These were the kinds of things that made up the Oral Tradition.
- d. You can see then that the obedience to the "how" yielded in them great confidence that they were honoring God all the more. They were going the extra mile and doing the extra credit work to make especially sure that they were in line with God's commands. But Jesus makes clear to them through Isaiah's words

that these extra efforts are not extra commending, but extra condemning. They are extra condemning because these extra efforts assume that outward action approves or disapproves one before God. These extra efforts reduce the Law of God to a set of outward rules to be obeyed. By Jesus quoting Isaiah he makes known to them that this has never been true of God's Word. In other words, he is not showing up on the scene in the First Century and re-writing God's Word and God's way – no, God's Law has never been singularly about conformity to some set of outward actions as proof of a person's righteousness. But this is exactly what the Pharisees' system of religion was all about. At the heart of their intricate system was the intention to prove through outward action their own righteousness. In other words, they believed that a right standing before God was something that could be earned and kept through outward conformity to God's Law which was guaranteed through the careful observance of the oral tradition of the elders. So, when they see Jesus' disciples not washing their hands before they eat in accordance with the system they have given their lives to keep and maintain – they are convinced that these disciples are unrighteous and unclean before God.

- e. These Pharisees claimed to be honoring God. When they talked about their lives they claimed a seriousness about honoring God and His Law by keeping the Law through the careful observance of the Oral tradition. And yet Jesus says – though you claim to be serious about honoring God, your heart is far from God. How is it that they are far from God even though they have given their lives to the careful keeping of these more specific rules around God's Law? The answer is found in their motive. They were convinced that the outward observance of the Law was a sign of their own righteous heart. In other words, they viewed righteous actions as the opportunity to prove the righteousness of their own heart – both to God and to others. And so their motive in keeping the Law and in the observance of the Oral Tradition was a motive of self-justification. They were out to prove their own righteousness through their own righteous actions. At the core of the Pharisaical system was the notion that I am good enough to please God and I just have to work hard enough to show forth my righteous heart through my righteous action. And this completely dishonors God! Righteous actions born out of self-justifying motives are condemned by God in this text. They claimed to be honoring God, but in actuality they were out to honor themselves. They were not interested in honoring God, but in making much of their own righteousness.
- f. And with this self-justifying hypocrisy dominating their hearts they were on the prowl to further justify themselves by finding others whose outward actions didn't measure up to their standards. And voila – here are the disciples eating with unclean hands. How delightfully appropriate. This teacher who is turning Israel on its head by claiming to be the Messiah and proving it to be so through miraculous works – there is no way he is the one true Messiah because his closest

followers don't measure up to the most basic observance of a truly righteous man, according to these Pharisees. Obviously Jesus cannot measure up as The Rabbi sent by God as The Messiah because his closest followers are unclean. Their whole system of thought about honoring God through religious practice was set up as a way to show their own righteousness. And so, this made them especially ripe to find fault in others who were not living up to the standards that they were living up to. If you keep laws before God in order to prove your own righteousness then you will easily find others who aren't keeping those laws and you will glory in how unrighteous they are as further evidence of your own righteousness. In other words, if you have a self-justifying spirit you will have a judgmental spirit toward others. In your attempt to prove your own righteousness you will be on the lookout for how others are unrighteous.

- g. Jesus says here in verse 6 – this is hypocrisy. This is fake righteousness. This is not true righteousness. This dishonors God. And this has always been true with God. God has never intended for mankind to prove his own righteousness, or to earn his own right standing before God through the observance of some Law. Rather the Law was given to God's people to show them they weren't righteous. The Law was given for the express purpose of making known mankind's sinful heart to God's people. So, Galatians 3:11 says "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." (Gal 3:11 ESV)
 - h. God's law was to have the effect of showing the sinner the depth of their own sinfulness and bringing them to the point of faith in God whereby they declare their inability to save themselves through righteous action and they look to God to save them through His Righteous Son. This has always been true for God's people – from Adam to Moses to Joseph to David to Daniel to John the Baptist to Peter to Paul to you and to me. God's people are never declared right with God through their righteous action because even our best efforts are but filthy rags, stained by sin. God's people are only declared right before God as they place their faith in God's ability to save them through some other means besides their own righteousness. The Old Testament is filled with this very thought. The prophecies point to a coming Righteous Branch of David who would never sin but upon whom the sins of the world would be cast. The Old Testament tells of men and women who knew their own sinfulness and who looked to God in faith to one day provide for them a Savior. These Pharisees – though they claimed to honor God – were doing the exact opposite because they were not seeking justification through faith, but justification through their own righteous deeds. They are hypocrites because their honoring of God was only external.
- II. **Because Their Worship of God Was Completely Vain – vs. 7-8**
- a. They are also hypocrites because their worship of God was completely vain. So Jesus continues to quote Isaiah in verse 7, and in so doing he gives us another

reason why this pharisaical system of outward conformity to an oral tradition is vain worship of God. And so he says, in vain do they worship me – why is their worship worthless and meaningless – because they teach as doctrines the commandments of men. So, outwardly there was no one in Israel who was more careful and diligent in their “worship” of God. They kept all of the Laws to the Nth degree – but Jesus says here that it was all meaningless and worthless. Well, how in the world can men who are seemingly so committed to right worship of God actually be doing nothing of the sort?

- b. Because in their careful observance of the oral tradition surrounding the Law they were actually leaving the commandment of God behind and holding to the tradition of men. This is what verse 8 makes all the more clear. So, they thought their oral tradition was helping them to better keep God’s Law and thereby worship the God of Heaven more properly, but Jesus makes clear here that it was doing the exact opposite. They were not protecting the Laws of God through the keeping of their traditions, but they were actually rejecting the Law of God through the keeping of their tradition.
- c. It is interesting to note the way that the Pharisees talk about their tradition and the way that Jesus does. So, in verse 5 the Pharisees say – why aren’t your disciples walking according to the *tradition of the elders*. That invests this tradition with inherent authority – the fact that it is the tradition passed down from the elders gives it authority that they assume must be obeyed. But when Jesus talks about this tradition in verse 7 he calls it the *commandments of men* and in verse 8 he calls it the *tradition of men* and then in verse 9 he calls it *your tradition*. In other words, while the Pharisees have invested authority into this tradition by saying it is from the elders, Jesus divests it of authority by making clear that it is simply from men.
- d. There are two test cases in this text that prove the points Jesus is making. The first is his own disciples eating food with unclean hands. This test case puts flesh on the bones of verse 6’s condemnation. They prove their heart is far from God by taking God’s Law and adding to it and then condemning others in light of their additions. They are not out to be righteous by faith, they are out to prove their own righteousness and this test case of the disciples’ unwashed hands proves that. The second test case is found in verses 9-13 and this puts flesh on the condemnation of their hypocrisy found in verses 7-8. So, they worship God in vain because they teach as doctrines the commandments of men and they leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men – this is proven through the test case of verses 9-13. In other words, these are not idle charges by Christ with no proof. Here is the proof you are holding to your tradition over the commandment of God. You allow through the keeping of a vow the breaking of the 5th commandment. You who are so intent on proving your righteousness through righteous actions stamp on the core of the Law through the keeping of

your own tradition. So in the first test case they add to God's Law and require religious practices for righteousness that are far beyond what God requires. In the second test case they obtain freedom from God's rule through the observance of their tradition.

- e. So what is going on here in this second test case – what is the scenario that Jesus is speaking about? Well, as proof that they have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish their own tradition Jesus quotes the 5th commandment – “honor your father and mother.” And then he references the consequence given in the Law for someone who doesn't honor their Father and their Mother in an extreme way – they must be dealt with in an extreme way – they must die. So, he makes clear what the command of the Law is. They are to honor their father and mother. Now remember, the Pharisees didn't think that the Law gave them enough. It gave them the “what”, but it didn't give them the “how.” So, here Jesus reiterates the “what” – honor your father and mother. But he then goes on to show that when they added to the Scriptures because they were convinced of Its insufficiency, they ended up countering that very Law. So, the tradition of the Elders said that a person could dedicate something to God by declaring it to be Corban – that is, a gift to God. It is really hard to piece together exactly how this was used in Jewish life in the First Century, but essentially it seems like this operated like a Trust fund that through Corban someone could designate to God. In other words, they wouldn't lose possession of it, or use of it, but when they died, it would go to the Temple – thereby limiting its usefulness now, especially to those who could benefit – like aging parents. The tradition of the elders said that if someone made this vow to God to give this property or this money or whatever to God, then it could not be used to help others, not even one's own parents because to break the vow to God was considered more serious than to not help one's parents. What Jesus says here is – that is ridiculous!
- f. Jesus expects that adult children will care for their aging parents. In Jesus' mind, this is part of honoring your father and mother. The obligations of honoring don't end when you become independent of your parents in adulthood. But rather, the expectation of the Law is that one will honor their father and mother their whole life. One specific way to honor them is to care for them in their aging years, and if you get out of that care for them by declaring your property to be dedicated to God through this use of a vow, then this dishonors God. In fact, in verse 12 Jesus summarizes by saying – “you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.” Those are condemning words. This hypocrisy has at its heart a rejection of God's Word in favor of man's word. And this is why their supposed worship was so worthless. If God is God then His Word is to be heeded and obeyed. You cannot say that God is God, worship Him with your lips, and then reject His Word and replace it with man's words. This is not worship of God.

This is vain and worthless. They are not worshiping God, they are worshiping themselves. This test case proves that they were taking the commandments of men and teaching them as doctrines of God. So, they were saying – you can honor God by keeping your vow. You can honor God by dishonoring your parents!

- g. *Illustration:* In January of 2013 a large group decided to go out to eat. And so this group of 20 went to the restaurant and enjoyed great food and great service. But when the bill came, one of the customers in particular was not happy with their bill. The bill had an 18% gratuity added to the total because it was a dining party of over 8 people. And so this customer decided to scribble out the tip that was included in the bill, put a large zero next to the tip section, and they scribbled this note on the receipt – “I give God 10%, why do you get 18%.” And then they proceeded to sign it – Pastor so and so. So the logic goes like this. I am honoring God by giving him my worship of 10%, and so I am not going to honor you more than I honor God. How completely dishonoring to God!! This pastor thought he was honoring God, but in reality he was defaming God through his supposed obedience. This is kind of like those Christians who go out to eat and they are super rude to their waitress or waiter and they complain about the food and about the service, but when they are leaving they put a Gospel tract on the table. Please do not do this! This dishonors God. This is hypocrisy. This is vain worship.
- h. Notice that Jesus says of the Pharisees that this whole Corban thing is not just the one bad apple in the bunch, but this is one example of many he could have given of how they are rejecting the commandment of God in order that they might establish their own tradition. So he says at the end of verse 13 – and many such things you do – present active verb – you are right now, and are continuing to do many things just like this. These are not rare instances of hypocritical thought in your past, but these are rampant realities of play-acting on the stage of your supposedly spiritual lives. You are hypocrites in many ways – Jesus is saying.

Conclusion:

It is very easy for us, as I said at the beginning, to deride the Pharisees and leave here praising God that we are not like them. But in reality, we are very much in danger every day of being like them. So, in light of this text let me close with some questions to examine your soul.

- Are you looking to your keeping of religious laws to prove your own righteousness? Are you trusting in your ability to be good enough, and to be better than others to save you? Do you have confidence in your own righteous heart, and are you striving every day to prove that righteousness through your adherence to spiritual laws? If you are, you know the emptiness of this. You know the guilt that remains. You know that this is an impossible feat. The Spirit of God is witnessing to your heart right now telling you that you are unjust and unrighteous and in need of a Savior. Religious adherence to a set of rules cannot save your soul. If that is your hope and your confidence, I call you this morning to confess your sinfulness and seek salvation in Christ. You cannot save

yourself, as the Scripture clearly says – He who knew no sin, Jesus, was made to be sin for us, so that we who are sinners might be made the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ. Your only hope to be made right with God is through Jesus Christ. It is clear that Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees is with religiously minded unbelievers. He is seeking to show them their need for a righteousness that does not come from within. But that does not mean that those of us who have already placed our faith in Christ are then somehow free from these heart tendencies of hypocrisy that we see in the Pharisees. Even though we know that our standing before God is only settled in Christ, we still have the tendency to think that we must daily earn God's favor through adherence to a set of rules.

- Christian, is your heart judgmental toward others? Are you on the prowl – holding other people to your standard of holiness? Are you quick to condemn them when you see that they don't do this or that just like you think they should? This is a sure sign of someone who is seeking to justify themselves by making sure they are acting right in accordance with a set of rules. This will then make you very quick to cast judgment upon others who do not match up to your standard of righteousness because by condemning them you will justify yourself. So, you look at that other parent who allows their child to get away with something that you don't, and your pride filled heart says – wow, I must be a better parent because I don't let my children do that. Or you get in the car with your friend and the radio station they have on is one you would never listen to and so you quickly revel in your righteousness as seen so clearly in the context of your friend's unrighteousness. Or you here of how someone spent some money on something that you would never spend money on because you are so thrifty, and your heart condemns them for their lack of good stewardship. The list is endless, but the question is direct – is your heart judgmental toward others?
- Before Paul's conversion he describes himself as zealous for the traditions of the elders (Gal. 1:14). What are you zealous for? The traditions of men, your own system of morality and righteous living? Or the infallible Word of God? A zealous spirit for the systems of morality and righteous living that are passed on from man is a pre-conversion like spirit – it is the stuff of the flesh. But a zealous spirit for the Word of God as it would shape and inform the redeemed life – that is the stuff of post-conversion life. So, for instance, when you are sitting around chatting with your friends about Christian living stuff and a controversial topic comes up – where does your mind immediately run? Is it zealous to defend that which you have always done and that which has been passed on to you from others? Or is it zealous to seek out the truth of God's Word as it would apply to that particular case? Let's Pray.

Benediction:

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you,

¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,

¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1Th 3:11-13 ESV)