

“All These Evils Come from Inside”

The Twenty-Second in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 7:14-23; Deuteronomy 14:1-20

While most people think that we humans are “basically good,” Jesus takes a much more realistic view of human nature. Our Lord’s stark assessment of human nature becomes apparent when we turn to the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees and teachers of the law as recounted in Mark 7. In their zeal to see Israel fully consecrated to YHWH, the Pharisees had long before instituted a series of binding rules and regulations (loosely derived from the law of God), designed to regulate every area of Jewish life. These rules and regulations were part of an ever-growing body of oral tradition which the Pharisees saw as the heart of Jewish piety. Yet, Jesus completely dismisses this oral tradition as nothing but “the rules of men.” While the Pharisees see these rules as the means of enforcing compliance with the law of God, so as to ensure that the nation was “holy” before the Lord, Jesus saw these same rules and regulations as an “end-run” around the authority of God’s law. And so, when challenged by the Pharisees and teachers of the law as to why he and his disciples did not comply with the ceremonial washings required by the Pharisees, Jesus dismissed the authority of these traditions outright when he told the Pharisees, “you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.”

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of Mark. As we saw last Lord’s Day, at some point after Jesus returned from the wilderness—where he had fed five-thousand people—Jesus was confronted by a group of Pharisees and teachers of the law. As Mark describes what transpires, he points out that some of these men were “sent from Jerusalem,” an indication that they were representatives of the Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish ruling body in Jerusalem. Like Herod Antipas, members of the Sanhedrin had likewise heard of Jesus and his ministry and quickly perceived him to be a threat. At some point they sent agents to Galilee to check Jesus out in person. The mission of these men—Mark calls them “teachers of the law”—was to gauge just how big a threat Jesus had become to the Jewish religious establishment. Jesus’ popularity was growing, and no one was sure as to who he was. Some thought Jesus to be John the Baptist, come back to life. Others thought that Jesus was Elijah. Others thought that he was one the prophets. Those who saw him feed five-thousand people in the wilderness were now sure that Jesus was the Messiah and they tried to make him king.

From the dialogue which transpires in the first thirteen verses of Mark 7, it is apparent that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were now watching Jesus and his disciples quite closely. They were hoping to catch Jesus doing something which would allow them to arrest him. If they could just catch Jesus, or his disciples, committing a serious enough violation of the law, they would not only have grounds to arrest Jesus, they might even be able to put him to death for committing a capital offense. As we have seen in the past few weeks, all of this takes place against the backdrop of the on-going struggle throughout Israel to determine Jesus’ true identity and the nature of his ministry. The Pharisees and teachers of the law have already made up their minds about Jesus. In their estimation, Jesus is either demon-possessed or else he is a magician and false teacher. They clearly believe that Jesus is a threat to them, and they will do everything in their power to stop him and put an end to his messianic mission. Furthermore, the scribes and Pharisees were no doubt aware of the huge crowds Jesus is attracting and they were jealous of all of the attention Jesus was receiving.

And so when the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus about why it was that his disciples did not

practice the ceremonial washings as required by the Pharisees, they were not asking the question because they wanted to know Jesus' opinion about this. Rather, this was a trick along the lines of the old question "have you stopped beating your wife?" If Jesus even answered the question, he would be tricked into admitting guilt, thereby giving the Pharisees sufficient grounds to arrest him. They may even be able to expose for all to see that Jesus was a law-breaker and indifferent to the holiness required of God's people. And this would put an end to Jesus' messianic mission once and for all.

Instead, Jesus quickly turned the tables on them. Quoting from Isaiah 29:13, Jesus pointed out that just as was the case when Isaiah foretold of impending doom to come upon the nation of Israel before the time of the conquest seven hundred years earlier, the people praised God with their lips, while their hearts were far away from him. By citing this verse and applying to the Pharisees, Jesus is making the point that despite all of the efforts of the Pharisees to impose their rules and regulations on the people to increase their holiness, Israel is in the same spiritual condition (if not worse) which brought down the covenant curse upon the nation which resulted in their captivity and exile in Babylon.

The Pharisees claim to be the guardians of the law whose goal is that Israel be holy before YHWH. They claim to be upholding and defending the proper worship of YHWH. And yet as Jesus points out, their hearts are far from YHWH. According to Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees have so buried the true meaning and purpose of the law under countless layers of canon law and oral tradition, that they have made the law itself null and void. Their traditions not only bury the law under the rules of men—so much so that the people no longer know what the law actually says—but their mishandling of Scripture causes them to pit their own oral tradition against Scripture and even worse, Scripture against Scripture. In fact, Jesus not only calls them to task for doing this, he goes on to point out that "*they do many things like this.*" He also warns them that their hearts are so far from God they worship God in vain.

What the Pharisees could not see is that it is their great external piety and zeal which actually condemns them. As Jesus says elsewhere, they are like white-washed tombs (Matthew 23:27), white on the outside, but filled with dead men's bones on the inside. And since their traditions end up nullifying the law, their rules and regulations have no impact whatsoever upon the sinful human condition. These men look like pious and godly individuals, zealous for God's law. No doubt, they were incredibly zealous and demonstrated a remarkable piety. Jesus now calls them hypocrites because he knows how sinful they are inside and because all their complicated rules and regulations cannot do one thing to deal with human sinfulness. But that is why Jesus has come, but then this is the very thing the Pharisees cannot see.

And so it is against the background of Jesus rejecting the Pharisee's unbiblical distinction between clean and unclean, and his complete rejection of "their traditions" that Jesus will now discuss why these rules and regulations are not only useless, but positively dangerous. Human sin cannot be removed or held in check by a series of man-made rules, or through performing a series of religious ceremonies, like the ceremonial washing of the hands. Human sinfulness lies deep with the human heart. External righteousness may hide the truth, but can provide no remedy for what truly ails us—the sinful human nature.

It was one thing for Jesus to reject the Pharisees' confidence in oral tradition. But at some point in this debate Jesus must refute the theology of the Pharisees which underlies the trick question as recounted in Mark 7:5—"*Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?*" And so what follows in verses 14-23, should best be seen as a continuation

of the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees as recounted in the first 13 verses of Mark 7.¹ While Jesus had shown that the question his opponents put to him was a trick question, Jesus will now take the matter one step further. He will expose the reason why the question was flawed in the first place. These men from Jerusalem—despite their great learning and extensive knowledge of the Torah—had no true (or biblical) understanding of sin. In their minds, the act of washing the hands before eating, provided a righteousness which was sufficient to receive the blessing of YHWH. But this only demonstrates how poorly the Pharisees understood the very law they were claiming to defend.

As the debate continues in verses 14-23, we learn that at this point, “*Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’*” Recall that when Jesus speaks in parables, he is hiding the spiritual truth he is trying to convey in plain sight. Speaking in such a way, Jesus confounds his enemies, who are spiritually blind and dull. In the case of the crowds who follow Jesus for all the wrong reasons, by speaking like this, Jesus is forcing all those who hear him, to seek for spiritual understanding. In other words, Jesus is forcing those people who are following him merely because he is a miracle worker, to listen very carefully to what he says. He is forcing them to seek from YHWH true understanding of his words.

Jesus’ point is really a very simple one. In order to understand what truly defiles someone, one must understand the gravity of human sinfulness. In a single sentence spoken to the crowds which had gathered around to watch the debate, Jesus now sets in complete contrast the true cause of defilement and the false view of the Pharisees. If people are not rendered unclean by what they eat, then it does not matter one wit (from a moral sense) whether or not they have performed the proper ceremonial washing before they eat. Rather, because we are unclean inside, it should be clear that sin comes from within. We defile what goes into us, rather than the other way around!

As Jesus will soon make clear, his point is clearly grounded in the biblical teaching that the human heart is the source of sin—not the muscle which pumps blood—but rather the heart as the symbol of a person’s true nature, i.e., what they truly are on the inside.² The biblical passages here are many and clear and quoting just a few of them will suffice to make this point: Genesis 6:5—“*The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.*” Jeremiah 17:9—“*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*” And then there is the prayer of the Psalmist from Psalm 51:10—“*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*”

Throughout the Old Testament, it is clearly taught that the human heart is the seat and source of all human sin. The Pharisees should have immediately known what Jesus was talking about, but there is no sign here that they pick up on Jesus’ point, even for a moment. According to Jesus, we are not defiled by what we put in our bodies. Rather what we put in our bodies is defiled, because we are sinful! That is why these washings and external rules and regulations have no value whatsoever in controlling sin and why making such a big deal out of these rituals actually obscures the reason as to why God gave Israel the law in the first place, which was to expose our sin and to show us our need of a Savior.

¹ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 239

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 254.

The very fact that Jesus would summon the crowd to gather around him after he responded to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, indicates just how important Jesus thought this point was. The language Mark uses here indicates that Jesus is speaking with divine authority and that his word is authoritative, while the traditions of the Pharisees are to be dismissed as having no valid authority whatsoever.³ We also need to see that Jesus does not set aside the law, question its authority or do anything to weaken its demands.

Furthermore, Jesus does not even set aside the distinction between clean and unclean. What Jesus does do is show that people are unclean because they have sinful hearts, not because they don't wash their hands. The flip side of this is that people with sinful hearts cannot be rendered clean just because they wash their hands in accordance with the rules of the Pharisees. Therefore, the key to understanding the error of the Pharisees is to see that they externalized sin—sin is what we do. But as Jesus points out, sin is internal—we are sinners. Because we have a sinful nature, we are unclean.⁴ His point is that unless the human condition is dealt with at its core, we cannot be holy before God, nor do the rules and regulations of the Pharisees do anything to “fix” the human condition. Because the Pharisees and teachers of the law have a flawed view of sin, they have a flawed view of righteousness.

Jesus' words were so simple and direct, it takes a minute for the reality of them to sink in. After making his point, Jesus walks away from the crowd to make sure his disciples understand what he just said. Therefore, we read in verse 17, *“After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.”* The sad fact is that even at this point in his ministry—after he had spent a number of months with his disciples—they are still really no different from the crowds. They do not yet understand Jesus' person and work. In fact, the failure of the disciples to grasp the nature of Jesus' mission, as well as his true identity, is a major theme of this section of Mark's Gospel. Mark has mentioned this in 6:52, here in 7:18; and will mention this again in 8:14-21.⁵ Not only is this less than flattering portrayal of the disciples a prominent theme in Mark's Gospel, which serves to support the eyewitness character of the gospels—who would make up bad things about themselves?—but this slowness to grasp the meaning of Christ's mission as well as his identity is ascribed to “hardness of heart.” In other words, human sinfulness as prevented them from understanding what should be obvious. Jesus' disciples are in the same helpless spiritual condition as everyone else.

Jesus' response to their question about the meaning of his saying was to lament, *“Are you so dull?” . . . “Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.”* Jesus now puts the matter plainly. We are not unclean because we eat or drink certain things—things from the outside. Since the heart is the seat of human sinfulness, the human condition has nothing to do with what we put in our bodies. The problem lies with the heart, not the digestive tract! There is no connection between food and uncleanness as the Pharisees had mistakenly assumed. All of the ceremonial minutia of the scribes and Pharisees completely missed the point and ended up obscuring the obvious. We are sinners by nature. We are not sinners because we eat certain foods. Nor are we righteous because we wash our hands in a certain way or avoid certain foods. Since Jesus mentions the heart in a specific context, we must not forget that the

³ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 254.

⁴ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 254.

⁵ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 255.

passage Jesus cited earlier, Isaiah 29:13 specifically says of the Pharisees that their hearts are far from God. These men were the most zealous and scrupulous people imaginable when it came to rules and regulations. Despite all their efforts to keep themselves from being defiled from the outside, the problem with them, just as with the crowds, and the disciples, is the human heart, which is the center of sin and uncleanness. The Pharisees may have clean hands, but their hearts are filled with evil.

In the last part of Mark 7:19, Mark includes the parenthetical remark, *“In saying this, Jesus declared all foods `clean.”* Remember, Mark is writing to a Gentile audience who may have been wondering why Christian teaching did not include adherence to the Old Testament dietary laws, such as those found in Deuteronomy 14:1-20, which was our Old Testament lesson this morning. Mark is explaining to his Gentile readers/hearers that when Jesus rejects the pharisaical understanding of clean and unclean, he is, in effect, laying down the rule which should settle the controversy over the dietary laws which were dividing Christian churches at the time Mark wrote his gospel.

We know from other New Testament passages, such as Galatians 2:11-17; Romans 14:14 and Colossians 2:20-22, that there were Jewish Christians or heretical groups demanding that Gentile converts keep the Jewish dietary laws. After his vision at Cornelius’ house as recounted in Acts 10:9-16, Peter himself (the source of much the material in Mark’s Gospel) began to teach, *“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean”* (Acts 10:15). Having seen that the dietary laws in the Old Testament were a type of greater purification to come, when Jesus died on the cross for our sins and then sent his Spirit to dwell in our hearts, Mark now draws the appropriate application from Jesus’ words to the disciples. This assertion that all foods are clean would confirm to Mark’s Gentile readers, what was taught in the rest of the New Testament, namely, that with the coming of Christ, the dietary laws have been fulfilled and are no longer binding upon Christians, since after all, what we put in our bodies does not make us unclean.

Once again, Jesus’ teaching is so clear—yet so polar opposite from that of the Pharisees—that it confounded the disciples, not because it was difficult to grasp, but because it was so different from what they had been taught previously. As Mark recounts in verse 20 and following, *“[Jesus] went on: ‘What comes out of a man is what makes him `unclean.’ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.”* The reason why, Jesus says, we are unclean, is because we have sinful hearts! In the background of Jesus’ words here is, of course, the fall of the human race into sin. Because Adam, who was created upright and righteous, without any such defilement of heart, rebelled against God during his time of probation in Eden, he plunged the entire human race into sin. As the old Puritans put it, in Adam’s fall, sinned we all. Jesus clearly presupposes this fall of the entire human race into sin when he speaks of the sinful human heart as the source of all sins.

As a number of commentators have pointed out, the list of sins which Jesus now enumerates to his disciples is clearly taken from the Old Testament⁶ which has the dramatic effect of putting the law back in its proper place, by considering the law’s true function, which is to tell us what the will of God is, and to condemn us whenever we violate any of its stipulations. The law is both the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude. Jesus begins by telling his disciples that because they have sinful hearts they have evil thoughts, which is the desire we all have to do things which are flagrant violations of the law of God. Sexual immorality is the desire to engage in sexual activity not sanctioned by Scripture. This would refer to sexual relations before marriage, outside of marriage (although Jesus also specifically mentions

⁶ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 242.

adultery in this list), as well as various acts forbidden in the law (bestiality, homosexuality), as well as things unique to our own age, such as pornography.

Jesus also speaks of theft—stealing someone else’s property, murder—the taking of life, greed—the desiring and hoarding of things beyond our need, malice—thinking and speaking ill of others with the intention of doing harm to their character and person, deceit—hiding the truth from others so as to gain personal advantage (lying) lewdness—lust, inappropriate behavior towards the opposite sex, provocative clothing and behavior, envy—(jealously) desiring the possessions and reputation of others, slander—intentionally speaking ill of others or lying about them to ruin their character and reputation, arrogance—thinking of ourselves as better and smarter than others, and then folly, which simply means the behavior of people who hate God and who have no desire to live according to God’s will.⁷

By the time Jesus is done enumerating some of the sins which spring from the sinful human heart—and in doing so completely condemning the traditions of men and all the ridiculous rules and regulations of the Pharisees—no one is left standing. The commandments of God condemn all of us, because we have sinful hearts from which spring all kinds of sinful behavior and desires explicitly condemned by the law of God. As Jesus puts it in verse 23, *“All these evils come from inside and make a man `unclean.’”* Washing your hands, praying with your hands raised, recite verses from rote, undergoing circumcision, observing dietary laws, observing feasts and so on as the Pharisees required, cannot do one thing to remedy the human condition, which is that we are sinful at our basic core (inside). And it is out of our sinful hearts that spring all manner of sins and sinful desires such as Jesus has just described. This is the point Jesus must make so that the disciples understand why Jesus is so adamant in rejecting the rules of men and as means of dealing with human sinfulness. Indeed, unless we understand the biblical teaching about human sinfulness, we will never be able to understand Christ’s sufferings upon the cross.

Obviously, there is a great deal of application to be drawn from this very important passage. First and foremost, it is important to see that while Jesus completely rejects the rules of men, with equal force, he reaffirms the authority of the law of God. The rules of men are not to be confused with the law of God—no matter how much wisdom, piety or zeal, these rules appear to have. It is the law of God—the Ten Commandments—which are binding upon God’s people. This is because the law of God reveals his will to us. Therefore, as Christians we define sin in light of God’s law, not in the light of a bunch of rules and ceremonies, invented by the self-righteous, who actually think that because they keep these rules, they are righteous, while those who don’t are not. God has made his will perfectly clear. The rules of men only obscure what God has said.

Second, as the Pharisees and teachers of the law were erroneously arguing, we are not sinners because we put certain foods in our mouths. Rather, we are sinners because our hearts are filled with sin. The Pharisees were also in great error when they taught that people are righteous if they actually practiced the washings and other religious ceremonies they required. Where the Pharisees go off the track in all of this is in their faulty estimation that people are righteous because they comply with the traditions of men and are unrighteous because they don’t wash or because they eat certain foods. Their faulty view of righteousness comes from a faulty view of human sinfulness. Sin is not what we do, it is what we are. Because our hearts are evil, we do those things which Jesus mentioned that we should not do. We do these things with glee and we do them knowing that these things are forbidden by God. We feel this

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 257.

way, because our hearts are filled with evil. As Jesus says, "*these evils come from inside.*"

Therefore, according to Jesus, it is because our hearts are sinful that we defile what we put in our bodies. This is why Jesus' renders all foods clean and why religious ceremonies such as these washings cannot do a single thing to remedy the source of all uncleanness, the human heart. What the disciples and crowds could not yet see, is that Jesus alone can fix the fundamental human problem. This is why he came preaching about the kingdom of God, casting out demons and healing the sick. These were his messianic credentials and the proof that he alone has the power to forgive sins. This is why Jesus will die for the guilt of our sins upon the cross, this is why God will raise from the dead for our justification, and this is why Jesus will baptize us in the Holy Spirit, not only purifying us from all our sins and imputing to us a perfect righteousness, but he will also create in us both the desire and the power to obey the commandments of God. And this is how sinful hearts become clean, not because we wash our hands.