

Mark 7:1-23 Religious Activity vs. Internal Righteousness

Mark 7:1-23, Religious Activity vs. Internal Righteousness

In Mark 7:1-23, the “religious police” represented by the Pharisees and scribes, came from Jerusalem like private investigators trying to find fault with Jesus. Over and over in all these stories in which Jesus confronts the religious leaders, Jesus reveals their hypocrisy. Externally they were super over the top religious, but internally in their hearts, they were just trying to please other people instead of God. Yet the only worship and belief that pleases God comes from our hearts when we sincerely believe in Him and show that belief in the love that flows from the inner person. Before Moses the lawgiver let them enter the land God was giving them, he gave them the “shema” prayer, which said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and all your might”. When the prophet Samuel went to the house of Jesse looking for the next King of Israel, God told him, “God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outer appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam.16;7). Therefore Israel during the time of Christ should have known that God cared very little for superficial appearances and external legalism. In Isaiah 1:11-15, God sent the prophet to Israel over 700 years before Christ to tell them that God cared nothing for their sacrifices, nothing for their offerings, and nothing for their prayers because God knew their heart was rebellious, unrepentant, and that they were involved in idolatry.

In Matthew 6:1-7, Jesus told His disciples to not be like the religious hypocrites who make a “big show” of giving alms, praying, and fasting. Instead Jesus’ disciples should be sincere giving alms in secret as for the Lord instead of trying to impress men. In the same way, in Mark 7 the Pharisees made a big show of a religious ceremony of washing themselves ritually before eating. This tradition of the religious leaders presumably was derived from the Mosaic Law found in Exodus 30:19-21. Levitical priests were to wash their hands in a special laver at the Temple. It was to be a ritual cleansing for priests to signify consecration in approaching the Holy place in the Temple. Almost fifteen hundred years later, the Pharisees had developed a tradition of this cleansing before eating wherever they were, and expected all Jews to comply (not just priests). It had become an outward expression of piety that they made a big show of to impress people with how holy they were. They were vainly trying to map out holiness with an external formula that would set them apart from sinners and Gentiles. In their economy, to be Jewish one washed his hands and feet according to a formula, and to undermine their tradition would be to redefine holiness. They would pour special water from a jug onto both hands with the fingers pointing up so that the water ran off their arms. Then the water was poured with their hands down. Then for an extended time each hand was scrubbed with the fist of the other hand, and all done in public so everybody could see. This was ceremonially cleansing the person and had nothing to do with just cleaning dirty hands before they ate. Therefore in Mark 7:5, the Pharisees accuse and interrogate Jesus about eating with “impure hands”. Their questions prompt the lengthy teaching of Jesus about what is clean spiritually, and the importance of a sincere heart relationship with the Lord. External observance of man-made traditions is no substitute for inner holiness.

Mark 7:6-13, Exposing the Hypocrites

Jesus began His admonishment with severe language directed at the Pharisees, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites”. Originally the Greek word for the actors in the Greek tragedies was “hypocrites”. The Greek word meant “play actor”, and was the term used for stage actors with skill at impersonating other personalities. Jesus gave it the negative connotation that it has today that the Pharisees were not actually holy on the inside, but did everything they could externally to appear holy to people. They were like actors playing a fake role than who they really were. Jesus’ clearest teaching condemning this can be found in Matthew 23:27-33, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s rotting bones and all uncleanness...You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?” In Mark 7:6-7, Jesus quoted Isaiah 29 in order to convict them from God’s Word that which they well knew, “You talk a good game, but your heart is far away from God, so you are wasting your time worshipping God because you teach stuff you made up instead of the Word of God” (my paraphrase).

Jesus then exposed their religious hypocrisy by giving an example of how they break the 10 Commandments. Instead of honoring their father and mother, they neglected them through a religious tradition called “Corban”. It was a shrewd religious loophole of setting aside property they claimed they were going to give to God in order to claim they didn’t have the wherewithal to take care of their parents. It was just an intention and not an actual disposal of property. Therefore Jesus saw right through their loophole, and it is safe to say that the Corban vow was just one of many ways they manipulated the Law since Jesus said in v.13, “and you do many things such as that”.

Mark 7:14-23, "Thus He Declared all Foods Clean"

After admonishing the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, Jesus made a public pronouncement to the crowd that expanded His argument to include all the Kosher eating traditions the Jews followed so rigorously. God had given Israel the eating restrictions in Leviticus 11 in order to separate them from the filthy eating practices of the Gentiles in Canaan, but now Jesus reveals that what you eat has nothing to do with your holiness. On the flip side, nothing you eat makes you unrighteous, but it's what comes out of the heart of a person in the lusts and anger and deceit resulting from their true inner thoughts and desires and intentions. Remember that the author, Mark was writing the Gospel of Mark to the predominately Gentile church in Rome, so these words were of great importance. The eating laws from Leviticus 11 were not given to save or make holy, but to promote good health and separate Israel as a nation. Jesus was rejecting the Pharisees' approach to the Law. The religious leaders were concerned with superficial impurity and appearances, but Jesus is concerned with internal impurity that cannot be washed away except by the blood of Jesus. I'm sure Jesus' announcement baffled even His own disciples who had been raised and indoctrinated to eat only certain things in certain ways. Therefore, when Jesus and His disciples left the crowd and went into the house, they asked Him to explain His parabolic saying, "there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him, but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man".

Theologians put great stock in what Jesus taught in Mark 7:18-23. Dr. Vincent Taylor wrote, "In laying down the principle that uncleanness comes from within, and not from without, Jesus stated a truth uncommon in Judaism at the time, which was destined to free Christianity from the bondage of legalism." William Barclay called this passage "well-nigh the most revolutionary passage in the New Testament". In Mark 7:18-19, Jesus admonished His disciples with harsh words to make a lasting impression, "do you so lack understanding" that you can't understand the simple truth that all food passes through the digestive tract and becomes the same thing in the latrine? How could any kind of food defile your holiness when it all ends up the same? It was important for Israel to obey the eating laws, which kept them healthy and separate from the Canaanites when they came into the Promised Land, but the laws had nothing to do with their salvation, and now that Jesus had ushered in the New Covenant of Grace, "He declared all foods clean". Now Jesus would explain where their true defilement came from.

In Mark 7:20-22, Jesus revealed the truth that all the lusts, greed, coveting, and anger that comes out of the heart of a person are what makes them a sinner. Jesus gave them a list of six acts they commit and six characteristics that form their character. The deeds are typically fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, covetings, and malicious acts. This is a radical pronouncement if you think mankind is basically good, but look at this from Jesus' view. In Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus explained that keeping the Ten Commandments involves more than just outward actions, but God judges your desires and intentions as well. Jesus said that even if you had not actually murdered someone, if you wanted to in your heart you were guilty. Even if you had not physically committed adultery, if you lusted in your heart for a woman, God considers it adultery. You must also be pure in heart as Jesus is. This is why Romans 3:23 is clear that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God". We have all missed the mark of holiness set by God. In Mark 7:21-22 Jesus also listed six characteristics common to man—deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. My question to you then is, "How much hand cleaning, or how much ceremonial water would it take to deal with these 12 vices?" Before he believed in Christ, the Apostle Paul tried to be righteous by keeping the laws and traditions, but he came to Christ and found out that it was all rubbish compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ as his Lord and Savior. Now Paul knew that true righteousness was being "found in Christ not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith".

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