

Mark 7:1-23

(NIV)

Clean and Unclean

¹The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and ²saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. ³(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles. ^[a])

⁵So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"

⁶He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

" 'These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

⁷They worship me in vain;

their teachings are but rules taught by men.' ^[b] ⁸You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

⁹And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe ^[c] your own traditions!

¹⁰For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' ^[d] and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' ^[e] ¹¹But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), ¹²then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. ¹³Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

¹⁴Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.' ^[f]

¹⁷After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸"Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'?" ¹⁹For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")

²⁰He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' ²¹For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²²greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

²³All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' "

Footnotes:

- a. [Mark 7:4](#) Some early manuscripts pitchers, kettles and dining couches
- b. [Mark 7:7](#) Isaiah 29:13
- c. [Mark 7:9](#) Some manuscripts set up
- d. [Mark 7:10](#) Exodus 20:12; Deut. 5:16
- e. [Mark 7:10](#) Exodus 21:17; Lev. 20:9
- f. [Mark 7:15](#) Some early manuscripts 'unclean.' ¹⁶ If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.

Author Philip Yancey, who is a friend from Colorado, once taught a class at his church on the pattern of Jesus' personal interactions with people, and he explained how Christ seemed to attract some pretty unsavory characters. He asked the class, "Do sinners like being around us? Do they seek us out in the same way they sought out Jesus?"



Then he recounted a story told to him by a friend who worked with people on the streets of Chicago. A prostitute came to his friend in desperation. She was homeless, her health was failing, and she was unable to buy food for your 2-year-old son. As the woman described her plight, the friend asked her if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. A look of shock and unfeigned incredulity crossed her face. "Church?!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? They'd only make me feel even worse than I already do!"

Someone then suggested that legalism in the church has created a barrier to non-Christians, and suddenly the class took off in a whole new direction. Many in the class started sharing war stories of how they had encountered legalism themselves. Yancey told of his own bemusement that when he was a student in the mid-70s at Moody Bible Institute they enforced a rule against facial hair, but every day, students filed past a large oil painting of the founder, D.L. Moody who himself broke the rule!

Each of us should be aware of how easy it is to succumb to the temptation to judge other people, and as followers of Christ we have a tendency to standardize and formulate ways in which we think a person can be right with God. It's easy to erect rules and lists of dos and don'ts, deciding who's in and who's not. This morning we look at a passage in the gospel of Mark which speaks to the matter of legalism, and the subject comes up in an encounter Jesus had with the scribes and Pharisees.

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Jesus' reputation was growing and He was becoming very popular, so another delegation of fact-finding theologians was sent from Jerusalem to further investigate the Galilean activities of this new rabbi. We read about the first delegation that was sent from Jerusalem back in chapter 3.

What do we know about these two groups of official Jewish leaders? The Pharisees were a sect of Judaism that developed in the late intertestamental period. They were actually lay people, not priests, and there were about 6,000 of them in Israel. They had a compulsive interest in matters of holiness as established in the Old Testament law, called the Torah, and they sought to put a hedge around it. They were also a significant and influential group politically.

The scribes, on the other hand, were experts in the study of the Torah, and they were the ones who originated the synagogue service. They came into being around the 4th or 5th century before Christ, and they preserved in written form what was called the oral law, or the tradition of the elders, and they also faithfully handed down the Hebrew Scriptures to succeeding generations. About 200 AD, a summary of the rules and regulations they developed on the oral law was committed to writing, and that summary is known as the *Mishnah*. You can still read it today.

What the delegation from Jerusalem discovered was that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before eating, and this was a big deal to them. Their complaint was not that the disciples weren't practicing good hygiene. Rather, the question was one of Jewish ceremonial purity, and they asked Jesus, "*Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?*"

What exactly was this tradition? The scribes and Pharisees developed rigid rules for the washing of hands as a part of their desire to live a holy life. Before every meal and between each of the courses, the hands had to be washed, and they had to be washed in a particular way. The water for washing had to be kept in special large stone jars, and the process for washing was very meticulous.

First, the hands were held with finger tips pointing upwards; water was poured over them and had to run at least down to the wrist. The minimum amount of water that had to be used was one quarter of a *log*, which was equal to 1 ½ egg-shells full of water. While the hands were still wet each hand had to be cleansed with the fist of the other. Next the hands had to be held with the finger tips pointing downwards, and water had to be poured over them in such a way that it began at the wrists and ran off



at the finger tips. After all this was done, the hands were considered ceremonially clean, and a person was free to eat. It was a rather elaborate process, wouldn't you say?!

To the Pharisees if a person failed to wash their hands in this way was not to be guilty of bad manners or to be dirty in the sense of one's health. Rather, it was to be unclean in the sight of God. The problem with all of this is that devotion to God had become buried under a mound of rules and taboos. To the scribes and the Pharisees, these rules and regulations were the essence of religion. To observe them was to please God, and to break them was to sin in their view.

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These scribes and Pharisees noticed that the disciples did not observe the tradition regarding the washing of hands, and they asked Jesus why. The Lord began His response by quoting them a passage from Isaiah 29 where the Old Testament prophet accused the people of his day of honoring God with their lips while their hearts were very far away from Him.

In His response, Jesus accused the Jewish leaders of hypocrisy. The word *υποκριτης* in this passage literally means "an actor." Jesus said they were living life acting on a stage without any real sincerity behind all their piety. Their devotion was all an outward show, carrying out external rules and regulations.

The Lord also went on to demonstrate the way in which these critics kept the letter of the law, but they violated the spirit of it. It had to do with a common practice in that day of calling something *corban*. The word meant "gift," and it was used to describe something which was specially dedicated to God. Declaring something *corban* was to make it as if it had already been laid upon the altar, set apart to God.

Christ described a situation in which a person could actually misuse the law for their own selfish benefit. For example, using the tradition of the elders, if a mother and father came to their son and asked him for financial help, the son could declare that what he had intended to give his parents was *corban*; it was "devoted to God." However, by declaring it *corban*, he did not necessarily promise to give it to the temple, nor did this prevent him from using it for himself. What he did was to legally exclude his parents from benefiting from it. So the very purpose for which the commandment was intended was set aside by the tradition of the elders.

Up to this point, Jesus had been speaking directly to the scribes and Pharisees, but now He addresses the crowd, and later on He talked privately with His disciples and further explained what He meant by His answer. Jesus had already shown that the elaborated hand washings were irrelevant, and He demonstrated that rigid adherence to the tradition of the elders could actually mean disobedience to the law of God. But here He says something that was even more startling to His listeners. He says nothing external can defile a person. Food, for example, cannot do this, not even if it is eaten with unwashed hands or declared unclean by kosher food laws. To a group of people who carefully observed dietary laws, this was unthinkable!

Jesus explained what really makes a person unclean doesn't come from the outside. It comes from the inside, in the heart and from the will of a human being. What a person thinks, what a person feels, what a person desires, these are the things that can make a person unclean in the sight of God – not just what they do on the outside. Jesus explained that the reason nothing entering a person defiles him is because it enters into the stomach and is eliminated, not the heart, and it is in the heart that the true issues of life really lie.

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This was a radical statement Jesus made, and He didn't win any friends in the Jewish establishment by saying it. But the point He made is just as important and relevant today as it was then. How often am I guilty of judging people by their outward appearance and never take the time to find out what's in their hearts? We have our own rules and regulations by which we measure people and figure out who's in and who's not. If someone doesn't hold to my political persuasion, if they live on the wrong side of I-35, if they didn't go to the right university from my point of view, I make a great many assumptions about them, and I measure people by the externals of life all too often myself.

This passage prompts me to ask serious questions. Is my walk with Jesus an outward show or an inward reality? Is my worship really from the heart, or am I just going through the motions? When I pray aloud, am I more concerned about sounding spiritual and eloquent than I am of really talking to God? Do I give careful attention to the commands of the Lord in Scripture, or do I focus too much on what other people think and say? Is my life guided by what the Lord requires of me or by what I think is politically correct?

In the list of attitudes Jesus mentions in vv.21-23 that really make a person "unclean" in the eyes of God, which of them am I guilty of? Where am I falling short of God's desires, and how have I harbored these things in my heart this past week? It is sobering to realize that envy, greed and slander are sins listed right alongside sexual immorality. In what ways have I been a hypocrite in recent days myself?

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I began this sermon with the story of Philip Yancey's Sunday School class. When they each told their war stories about ways in which they had encountered legalism, the class laughed, everyone except Greg. With anger in his eyes, he raised his hand and said, "If feel like walking out of this place." Suddenly, the room quieted down.

"You criticize others for being legalistic Pharisees. I'll tell you who the real Pharisees are. They're you," he said pointing at Philip, "and the rest of you people in this class. You think you're so high and mighty and mature. You find a group to look down on, to feel more spiritual than, and you talk about them behind their backs. You're acting like the people Jesus couldn't stand!"

All eyes turned to Philip for an answer, but he had none to offer. Greg was right. Philip glanced at the clock, hoping for a reprieve, but it showed 15 minutes of class time remaining. He waited for a flash of inspiration, but none came.

Then Bob raised his hand. He said, "I'm glad you didn't walk out, Greg. We need you here. I'm glad you're here, and I'd like to tell you why I come to this church. Frankly, I identify with the prostitute Philip mentioned. I was addicted to drugs, and in a million years it would not have occurred to me to approach a church for help. Every Tuesday, though, this church lets an AA chapter meet in the basement room we're sitting in right now. I started attending that group, and after a while I decided that a church that welcomes an AA group can't be all bad, so I made a point to visit a service."ⁱⁱ

My friends, what would it take for our church to become a refuge? What would it take for us to become a place of grace where each person could struggle find health and wholeness, as well as holiness in the Lord? What changes in our lives does God want to inspire in order to transform us into that community of grace? The world is looking for a safe harbor to come in from the storm, and the more we can reflect the love of Jesus rather than a bunch of rules and regulations, the more likely it is they will find a refuge in Christ with us. This week, take a look at the Pharisee in your own heart, and let's seek to follow Jesus from the inside out!

ⁱPhilip Yancey, "Where the High and Mighty Meet the Down and Dirty", *Christianity Today*, January 11, 1993, p.80.

