

The Heart of the Problem 2021
Deut. 10:12-21 Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Deuteronomy 10:12-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only 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, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Many ears ago I attended a worship service in Damascus, Syria.

It was a very meaningful and powerful worship experience
in a Muslim city hostile to Christians and Christianity.

It was their custom at the end of the worship service in that church,
for everyone to get up, greet and hug every person in attendance,
maybe because they were leaving the warmth of fellowship
to go out to a culture so adamantly opposed to their faith.

**That ever-present risk and sense of persecution and danger
had a strong influence on how they expressed their faith.**

Also during seminary, I attended several worship services in Ghana.

In Ghana, worship always began with the loud “talking drums”,
and a delightful mix of vibrant music, joyful movement & dance.

It was a treat and a significant learning experience for me
to see and experience how their African culture and context
influenced the wonderful ways they expressed their faith ...
... quite different from the familiar style of worship we’re used to...

**... which compels me to consider and question a bit deeper,
the nature of my expressions and practices of faith,**
leading to the question, **what are the essentials of Christian faith?**

The challenge for all of us is **to recognize** that our style of worship,
religious practices that help us experience God & express our faith...
**... these are not the same thing as our faith itself,
and that faith is much more than just what we do...**

**... after all,
it’s far easier to follow familiar practices and rituals,
than it is to follow Jesus, allow him to reign in us
and to let the Spirit transform our hearts & lives.**

When the nation of Israel was defeated and taken in exile to Babylon,
that created a cultural challenge and theological crisis for them.
**How amid the corrupting influences of the surrounding culture
could they live faithfully & distinct as God’s chosen people?**

During the Babylonian captivity it became necessary and critical
to not get absorbed into pagan a culture or the idolatry of Babylon,
**but to remain separate and faithful to the God of Israel?,
and purity rituals were to help maintain that religious distinction.**

Within that context, ritual purity practices made perfect sense
as a way to preserve Jewishness & traditions while in Babylon...
... but then over the next few centuries, and back home in Israel,
those rituals took on a very different meaning and purpose.

Rather than a means for remaining separate & distinct **while in exile,**
ritual purity became an external measure of worthiness before God,
and means to feel superior and separate from unworthy outcasts...

...which continued and was even intensified by the time of Christ,
and became a source of conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus.

Jesus taught a radically different understanding of holy and purity.
His concern is not an impurity or defilement from the outside,
but that which is within our hearts that truly offends God.
So it’s not just doing the right thing, but it’s actually **wanting** to do the right thing.

As Jesus explained, it’s from our heart, from our inner self that
our outward behavior and words, evil or good, **will flow,** vs. 15 & 23
...there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out
are what defile. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

Jesus rejected the idea that our external religious behavior
somehow made some people more loved and acceptable to God...

... because the message and truth of Jesus,
is that no one is excluded from God's gracious love and healing,
and all those we'd see as outside **are actually our neighbors** ...
... as Jesus illustrated through the story of the Good Samaritan.

It's not that our religious traditions, cultural forms of faith,
or that our customs, rituals and familiar ways of being Christian
are all wrong, or don't matter or make any difference --

- but empowered by the Holy Spirit living inside us, we are invited
to delve deeper, and to consider **the "why" beneath and behind**
what we say & do that drives our thoughts, feelings & attitude.

Jesus is not so concerned about cleaning our hands
as he is about healing and putting grace into our hearts,
and the only way to clean the mess he finds inside,
is for him to heal the secret-broken places of our lives,
the unresolved wounds inside that are still disturbing our peace.

There are two parts of God's call, and it's not choosing either/or,
but finding balance, holy before God **and** loving our neighbors.
They are both required as our response to God's gracious love.

A holy people called by God to live faithfully separate and apart
from the world's defective ways, culture, values and debauchery,
and who attract others toward a grace-relationship with God
by living God's grace and compassion toward our neighbors.

As we read, as described in Deut. 10:12, 19

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only 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, You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

So how do we accomplish that and what does it look like?

A rancher from Texas was visiting a rancher friend in Australia.
The Texan noticed that he didn't see any fences anywhere,
so he asked his host, "Why aren't don't I see any fences?"
The Australian replied, "We don't need fences here in the Outback."

The Texas rancher insisted that of course you need fences,
otherwise your cattle will wander off and get lost.
His host explained, "We don't need to build fences. **We dig wells**,
because cattle don't wander away from where there's water to drink.
So is there any water here at 1st Pres., for the thirsty of our community to drink?

The Pharisees who opposed Jesus did religion based on rules & ritual,
that like fences were used to separate and exclude,

to hold the Hebrew people in and fence the gentiles out...
 ...in contrast, **Jesus dug wells, inviting everyone to come and drink.**

**Jesus taught and lived a very different vision and perspective,
 proclaiming a God whose grace is open, compassionate and inviting,
 who welcomes the sick, the sinner, the outcast, lost and wounded,
 and calls us to a discipleship that destroys our enemies
 with mercy, by loving them into a relationship of grace.**

His point: beware of religious preferences, practices & observance
 that gets in the way of fulfilling the heart of the God's will,
 which is **to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbor.**

Consistent with the teaching of the OT prophets before him,
 Jesus is making the point that there is
 a great distinction between outward religious ritual,
 and true devotion to God and the love of God in our heart.

vs. 6-7

Jesus said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

If we could be perfectly correct in all we say and do, our good works,
 right in how we worship, in the theology and doctrine that we follow,
we could still miss the heart of the Gospel message entirely.

What the Lord really wants, what God has always wanted and intended,
 was to share a real relationship with his people, all his children.

That has been God's goal, plan and purpose all through Scripture,
 and so God calls us to respond to his love by obeying his voice,
 so that it may go well with us as God intends and desires
 as we live in a living growing relationship with our God.

But how does our faith-relationship with God grow and develop? ...

... I believe it's similar to the way that a crab grows and develops,
 which may be an unfamiliar unknown here in New Mexico.

It turns out that there is something more to be known about crabs,
 than just Old Bay Seasoning and cocktail sauce,
 or the ultimate recipe for she-crab soup or crab cakes.

A crab's skeleton is on the outside of its body.

That *exoskeleton or shell* is hard, rigid & cannot grow any bigger.

So how, how does a crab grow larger ?

As a crab's body starts to grow and get larger, and need more room,
 since its shell can't get any bigger,
 it will eventually become too cramped to live and move.

So when a crab has grown too large for its shell,
 it cracks open and the crab leaves its old shell.

It has to abandon that cramped but secure protective shell,

leave that hard encasing & risk exposure until a new shell can form,
which usually takes just a few days.

Religious rules and traditions can function like a crab's shell.

The Pharisees had encased themselves in rules and ritual purity
which shifted their focus away from what matters most to God,

and with more & more focus on rules of ritual purity & separation,
their primary focus was on who is on the inside and who is out...

... as Jesus forcefully accuses: vs. 8;

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.

When the religious leaders came from Jerusalem to observe Jesus,
they understood themselves to be '**Keepers of the traditions**'
and they wanted to use their rules of ritual purity
to challenge Jesus and his teaching authority.

They considered Jesus to be, religiously incorrect and outside,
by associating and eating with tax collectors and sinners,
by opening God grace to the lowly, unworthy and outcasts.

In a move to embarrass Jesus, and to undermine his ministry: vs 5

... the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the
tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

Their question has nothing to do with hygiene,
or anything that God ever commanded of Israel...

... but, as often happens in exclusive - legalistic communities,
their focus was on adherence to their human originated rules,
their traditions & rituals intended to separate and divide,

**and following visible & outward pious behaviors of ritual purity,
had become more important than even God's own Laws & commandments.**

God's concern is not about eating with dirty or defiled hands,
but in our having a dirty - defiled heart, a heart apart from God.

**Our hands are made clean not by perfectly performed ritual washing,
but by getting them dirty while loving and serving our neighbors,**
and the specific applications from these texts I see today,
can be drawn from the example of how a crab grows.

FIRST:

Like crabs trapped in restrictive inflexible shells,
we too may need to abandon our rigidity and judgements,
to risk being vulnerable, uncomfortable, welcoming and open,
and without our protective shells, allow others to come near.

SECOND:

Without its shell,
a crab must find a protective place while so vulnerable,
someplace where it can be safe and secure from harm.

The fact that some restaurants feature soft shell crabs,

suggests that there may be some places & situations that are more protective and more safe than others.

The church's call and the command from Jesus, **empowered by the Spirit** is to follow and live his concern for strangers and outcasts, to learn from, and faithfully obey **the example of Jesus, of inviting and welcoming all, and including outsiders.**

The church has to be a place where people can drop their hard shells, where they can be open, vulnerable, and express need without being attacked, wounded or eaten by predators, and where we are constantly inviting **and digging new wells, rather than building more fences that separate and exclude.**

So let us grab hold of the promise, hope and biblical truth that God embraces us in our brokenness, our failures and weakness, in order to restore us and to bless us toward usefulness so that it may go well with us, walking with our God.

Therefore our call is to be a safe protective place for soft shells, a supportive place for people in trouble and in need, a place for people who have messed up their lives, a place of comfort for people who struggle and hurt, **a secure place where all can experience God's mercy and love,** for it is never too late for God to work from the inside.

Perhaps the best question to ask ourselves is this:
in the end, will that things I've focused on in life really matter?