

Distracted From What Matters Most 2024
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 20-23

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 20-23 (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." And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. 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."

A Presbyterian minister who always felt apprehensive when flying
ordered a Jack Daniels from the beverage cart to help him relax.
He was in the middle seat between two women who were strangers,
but both returning from a Southern Baptist holiness convention,
excited & talking about what an uplifting experience it had been.

Then one of them apologized for speaking just to each other over him,
and said, "I am Mary, and what do you do for a living?"
Somewhat reluctantly he said, "I am a Presbyterian pastor."
The one on the other side, "Oh, then you are a holy man of God" and,
pointing to the whiskey, "then you don't really want that, do you?"

Looking both ways, thinking about the many hours left in the flight,
he paused, picked up his drink and replied,
"Madame, I don't believe I've ever wanted it more."

When Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Babylonians,
that created a theological and cultural challenge and crisis.
**It had been believed and assumed as absolute fact,
that no matter what, the Temple in Jerusalem,
the heart of Israel's worship could never fall.**
**So how could God let this happen?, and if not the Temple,
what would now be the core and heart of their religion?**

In answer to that challenge,
and to keep distinct from the corruption of Babylonian influences,
the focus of religion shifted away from worship in the Temple
to their religious traditions, rules and rituals of Judaism.

Their focus became an emphasis on ritual purity and washing –
- not as a matter of hygiene,
but as a **separate distinction from world & culture around them.**

In that context, ritual purity practices made perfect sense
as a way to preserve Jewishness & traditions **while in Babylon.**

It was a symbolic reminder that they were chosen and blessed by God,
**so that even amid the most commonplace thing such as eating,
we remember our God, and we remember who we are
by following our religious rituals and traditions.**

But then over the next few centuries, and back home in Israel,
those rituals had taken on a different meaning and purpose.

Rather than a way to remain separate and distinct while in Babylon,
ritual purity became seen as a measure of one's worthiness to God,
a way to exclude and be separate from sinners and outcasts.

**That focus on religious rules & ritual, on human effort and behavior
became a destructive distraction away from what truly matters most.**

That also became **a source of conflict between the Pharisees & Jesus,
because Jesus had a very different vision and perspective of God,
a God whose gracious love is open, compassionate and inviting,
who welcomes the sick, the sinner, the outcast and wounded.**

During the Babylonian captivity, it had been critically important
not to take up with the pagan culture and gods of the Babylonians,
but to remain separate & pure toward the God of Israel,
and ritual helped maintain their connection with God.
But such rituals were not necessarily appropriate for all time.

During seminary I attended several worship services while in Ghana,
which included a vibrant mix of music, joyful movement and dance,
that was quite different than I was used to back home in America.
It was a treat and a significant learning experience for me.

I got to see & experience how their African culture & context
influenced the wonderful ways they expressed their faith,
which compelled me to consider and question more deeply
the nature of my own expressions and practices of faith.

I learned that the practices that help us to experience our faith
are not the same thing as our faith itself,
and that faith is so much more than just what we do.

In Mark, Jesus objects to the Pharisees' focus on ritual & tradition,
especially using those religious purity rituals and traditions
to exclude & keep certain people away from the promises of God.

By then, Jesus had already done amazing miracles in God's name,
he had revealed incredible knowledge and insightful teaching,
but the religious authorities were ignoring all that.

They missed the point, in defense of their human traditions & ritual.

It is not that having and following our religious traditions,
our customs, rituals and familiar ways of being Christian
are all wrong, and don't matter or make any difference ---
-- but empowered by the Holy Spirit in us, we are invited to see
that **there are other ways to express and proclaim our faith.**

The city council Makkinga, a small village in northern Holland,
in an experiment, decided to remove all the traffic signs,
including stop signs, speed limits and even lines on the streets.

They decided that enforcing lots of rules may actually reduce
a driver's of being considerate and personally responsible.

So by allowing a greater degree of freedom over their driving,
they hoped to increase a sense of responsibility for road safety
and have more consideration for others using the road with them.

The results?
A lower overall traffic speed than when the signs were up,
and a very dramatic decrease in traffic-related incidents.

Jesus reduced all the religious rules & rituals to two essentials.
Love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself.
Just focus on the essentials and everything else falls into place.

The Pharisees did religion based on rules, rituals and tradition.
In contrast, Jesus taught a very different vision and perspective,
proclaiming a God whose grace is open, compassionate & inviting,
who welcomes the sick, the sinner, the outcast, lost & wounded.

The focus is to live an authentic and faithful life in the Spirit,
a life that faithfully responds and reflects God's grace and love
as it was revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus.

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

That has been God's goal and intention all along the way,
and so God calls us to respond to his love by obeying his voice,
so that it may go well with us,
as we live into a growing relationship with our God.

The Pharisees had encased themselves in rules and ritual purity
which shifted their focus away from what matters most to God,
as Jesus forcefully accuses them, vs. 8,
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.

There is a great distinction between outward religious practices,
and a growing devotion to God with the love of Christ in our heart.

We can be perfectly correct in all that we say and do,
even in our style worship, our theology, our doctrine,
and still miss the point entirely if we are not open
to God's transforming, renewal and continuing call.

When the religious leaders came from Jerusalem to see 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",
- associating and eating with tax collectors and sinners,
- spreading God grace to lowly strangers and outsiders.

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?"

I truly love the way Jesus responded, 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.

God's concern is not about eating with dirty or defiled hands,
but in having a dirty - defiled heart,
and a dirty - defiled heart is one that excludes others.

**Our hands are made clean not by perfectly performed ritual washing,
but by getting them dirty while loving & serving our neighbors.**

Our walk with God and neighbor reveals the true content of our hearts,
for **it's not Christian love until it's a love for all God's people.**

Jesus' ministry was about breaking down walls and barriers,
inviting, welcoming and including outcasts and strangers,
& by giving grace to the beloved and chosen children of God.

The church has got to be a place where people can heal & feel safe,
a supportive place for people in trouble, wounded and in need,
a place for people who have messed up their lives,
a place of comfort for people who struggle and hurt,
where we can all be open, honest and vulnerable,
without being attacked or eaten by predators,
a secure place where all can experience God's mercy & love.

The call today is not to take any specific action or try even harder.
It's a call to trust and reflect, and then **respond from within**
according to the powerful truth of God's will, love and grace,
for it's that which brings about and leads
to a living faith that pleases the Lord,
for us to reflect the same blessings and grace we have received.

Righteous is the gift of grace and mercy only through Jesus Christ,
that leads to our faith and an authentic relationship with God,
which leads to transforming us and our lives **from within.**

Faith is about letting Christ in to reign and transform our hearts,
and not just our outward religious appearances and good deeds,
but more about what we've allowed to fester within our hearts.

**So is my focus on the right things, on things that really matter most?
God is about changing & growing our faith and Christian character,**

for we are always in the process of being reshaped & reconfigured.

At the Lord's Table of grace today, reflect anew on God's love for you.

The point is not just that we arrive in God's Kingdom of Heaven,
but that our relationship with God develops well along the way,

and know that it's no great mystery where God wants our focus to be.

(Micah 6:8 The Message)

But he's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, And don't take yourself too seriously— take God seriously.