

First Serve

Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 7:1-23

Topic

Jesus tells us it's not what enters from *outside* that defiles us, but what is already *inside* each one of us

Title

"Inside Man"

Introduction

Lunch with friends, after church, sounds fun, but should you be concerned about the folks who are preparing your food?

About 3,000 Americans die every year from food-borne diseases, and more than 120,000 are hospitalized. Recognizing that restaurants and delis are the source of more than half of food-borne illness outbreaks, health specialists for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) went inside the kitchens of hundreds of restaurants across ten states, including California, to determine which practices could be making people sick. Here are three of their findings:

- Nearly two-thirds of restaurant workers who handle raw beef aren't washing their hands afterward.
- More than half said they had worked a shift while sick.

- Twenty percent said they were vomiting or had diarrhea on at least one shift, and twelve percent indicated that they had those symptoms for at least two shifts.

That's OK, you say, because you'll go to the doctor if you get sick. Another study, this one reported by WebMD, said upwards of one-half of doctors don't wash their hands between visits with hospital patients.

In general, after using the bathroom, you'll be happy to know that only one out of every ten people *don't* wash their hands.

However, only five percent of those people wash their hands properly, using soap and washing for 15 to 20 seconds, about as long as it takes to sing "Happy Birthday."

Lunch at home never sounded better.

I'll tell you who you could trust to wash their hands, and that was the Pharisees and Scribes in the first century. They followed elaborate, meticulous, hand washing rituals before every meal.

You might still get sick, however, because the kind of hand washing they practiced was not for hygiene. It was ritual and ceremonial.

They washed their hands to show how spiritual they were.

One day the Pharisees and Scribes caught Jesus' disciples eating without first practicing ritual hand washing. They thought they finally had something actionable with which to accuse Him and undermine His popularity among the common people.

Boy, were they wrong. Jesus took their accusation and turned it against them. He labeled their rituals "the traditions of men," and showed how they are a hypocrisy that leads to a false sense of spirituality, and to outright disobedience.

His great summary comment, a true life principle, is, "There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man" (v15).

We need to have ears to hear because, while we may scorn ritual hand washing, we tend towards our own "traditions of men," and we need to be certain they are not a hypocrisy that leads to a false sense of spirituality, and to outright disobedience.

I'll organize my thoughts around two questions: #1 How Much Do You Consecrate External Things?, and #2 How Much Do You Concentrate On Internal Things?

#1 How Much Do You
Consecrate External Things?
(v1-13)

An old Pentecostal jingle warns you, "Don't smoke; don't chew; and don't date the girls that do!" Is that a true measure of spirituality?

We appreciate the biblical wisdom of Charles Spurgeon, called by some, the Prince of Preachers. He was no fan of going to the theater. He wrote,

As I look abroad, I am grieved and have great heaviness of spirit at what I see among professing Christians. A very serious matter concerns the amusements engaged in by professing Christians. I see it publicly stated, by some who call themselves Christians, that it is good for Christians to attend the theatre, so that the tone and character of the productions may be improved. The suggestion is about as sensible as if we were bidden to pour a bottle of lavender water into the main sewer to improve its aroma.

Spurgeon's critics pointed out that he probably said that while indulging in a habit of his own - smoking a fine cigar. I'm not sure if it's true, but the way I heard it, Spurgeon once said he would quit smoking if his habit became obsessive. When asked to define 'obsessive,' he said, "Smoking more than one cigar at a time."

Another story is told about Spurgeon meeting the great evangelist, D.L. Moody. It goes like this:

Moody went to London to meet Spurgeon, whom he had admired from a distance and considered to be his professional mentor. However, when Spurgeon answered the door with a cigar in his mouth, Moody fell down the stairs in shock. "How could you, a man of God, smoke that?" protested the great American evangelist.

Spurgeon took the stogie out of his mouth and walked down the steps to where Moody was still standing in bewilderment. Putting his finger on Moody's rather rotund stomach, he smiled and said, "The same way you, a man of God, could be that fat!"

Was Moody less spiritual for being overweight? Was Spurgeon more spiritual because he had no prohibition about smoking?

The answers to those questions are intensely personal. They could only be answered by Moody and Spurgeon letting God search their hearts for the true motivations behind their practices.

The thing we want to see today, from the words of Jesus, is that nothing external defiles you. What that means, practically, is that we need to stop thinking that we, and others, are either more spiritual, or less spiritual, because of some outward practice.

Although this teaching can be applied to liberties like eating and drinking and smoking, it especially has to do with rites and rituals that people think make them more spiritual than others.

Drawing from my own experience, I'd cite the rites and rituals of Roman Catholicism. I was infant-baptized. I went to Catechism Classes. I said my first Confession, then partook of Communion. I participated in Confirmation.

None of those external rites and rituals had any effect upon my heart - except, sadly, to make me think I was going to Heaven when I most certainly was not.

When I was born-again by trusting Jesus to save me and forgive my sin, my heart was transformed. I then would experience water baptism, confession and communion in the ways the Bible sets forth - as a part of my relationship with Jesus, and not as a religious practice.

Mark 7:1 Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem.

This was an official fact-finding mission. Or maybe it would be more accurate to call it a fault-finding mission.

The religious leaders of Israel had voiced their displeasure with Jesus. They were trying to find a reason, or reasons, to accuse Him.

Their cred was that they "came from Jerusalem." These were guys who had climbed the ladder and were deemed superior to their peers.

It might make a difference in the secular world where your degree was issued, but not with regard to the Gospel. Having a larger group you minister to, or being in what seems to be a more influential position, doesn't really mean you are more spiritual.

Alan Redpath used to tell pastors, "God spoke through a donkey in the Old Testament, *and He has spoken through many a donkey since then.*"

Mark 7:2 Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault.

They were watching their every move, to find fault.

Like it or not, if you profess to be a Christian, people watch you, and it is often to find fault. On the one hand, it is reasonable for them to assume that knowing Jesus makes us different. It really should. As to how different, and what I do and do not do, that's between you and the Lord. But I'd add that my liberty to do or not do something should be subordinate to causing others harm.

On the other hand, we are all works in progress, and there is plenty of fault still to be found in each of us.

"Unwashed hands" has a special meaning, which Mark explains in verses three and four.

Mark 7:3 For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders.

Mark 7:4 When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.

Notice Mark says that "the Pharisees... do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way..." He is describing a religious ritual way of rinsing your hands, a ceremony, that the Pharisees burdened the people with. An early Jewish document reads,

Hands become unclean and are made clean as far as the wrist. How so? If [you pour] the water over the hands as far as the wrist and [pour] the second water over the hands beyond the wrist and the latter [water] flowed back to the hands, the hands...become clean.

It would be more accurate to call this a hand rinsing. Your hands would not necessarily be *hygienically* clean, but they would be *ritually* clean.

It spilled-over to the ritual washing "of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches" - with everything associated with eating. You couldn't eat without first rinsing your hands and your utensils in a special, ritual way.

We frequently criticize the disciples for their lack of spiritual insight. But notice that "some of [the] disciples [ate] bread with...unwashed hands." They were growing in fellowship with the Lord - leaving behind the burdens of religion for the blessings of relationship with Jesus.

The Pharisees, looking to accuse Jesus, wasted no time.

Mark 7:5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

They honored the Scriptures - what we would call the Old Testament - as the Word of God. But there was also the oral law, which was the interpretation of influential rabbis, in addition to the Word of God.

In the matter of ritual hand washing, in the Scriptures, God commanded the priests to ritually wash before serving Him.

The rabbi's came along and suggested that if it was good for the priests to wash, wouldn't it be good for everyone? Wouldn't it be pleasing to God?

Apparently not, based on the answer Jesus is going to give them.

Mark 7:6 He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.

Mark 7:7 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

Mark 7:8 "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men; the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do."

Hypocrisy describes the stage actor wearing a mask to portray his or her character. Traditions of men are a mask that do nothing to affect the person wearing it. They are nothing more than an act. You learn lines of dialog that mean nothing.

That was true of me with every religious ritual I performed growing-up. I memorized ritual prayers, and responses, like an actor wearing a mask, and playing a role.

Outward practices cannot affect the inner person. There must be a change in the heart first, *then* a change in behavior consistent with the precepts and principles taught in God's Word.

Once you begin to establish rites and rituals that add to the Scriptures, the next step is to allow them to overrule the Scriptures.

Mark 7:9 He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.

Mark 7:10 "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.'

Mark 7:11 "But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban"; ' (that is, a gift to God),

Mark 7:12 "then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother,

Mark 7:13 "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."

The fifth commandment demands your continuing responsibility for the elderly, and especially your own parents. But that requires sacrifice.

Instead of sacrificing to help their needy parents, the Jews had developed a tradition that you could dedicate your money to God - making it unavailable to *anyone* else - even your parents. You didn't, however, actually give your money to God; you kept it.

Thus you appeared spiritual by the keeping of the added, outward tradition, while you were disobeying a clear command from the Bible.

Christians have a reputation for spending a great deal of their time consecrating external things. It may not be fair, but most nonbelievers know us for what we don't do, for what we are against, rather than what we do, and what we are for.

Make it a goal to try to change that.

The point to make here is this: We can't improve upon the Bible by adding our own, more restrictive, rules, rites and rituals. It can only backfire, and make us actors on a stage.

#2 How Much Do You Concentrate On Internal Things?

(v14-23)

Spurgeon wouldn't have gone to see the Pixar film, *Inside Out*. The film is set in the mind of a young girl named Riley Andersen, where five personified emotions - Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust - try to lead her through life.

Jesus is going to take us within the mind, or what we call the heart. What He finds residing there, in each of us, is far from Pixar.

Mark 7:14 When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand:

Mark 7:15 "There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man.

Mark 7:16 "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Like all over-used expressions, I'm tired of 'garbage-in, garbage-out.' It's a true assessment, however, so why does Jesus seem to contradict it?

Jesus wasn't saying that there are not defiling things that we can take in to ourselves. There are, and we all know that. It's why even nonbelieving parents care about what their kids watch and hear.

Jesus was pointing out that no matter how much ritual religion you practice, defilement is already present in your heart - resident in you heart. You need help that a ritual, like hand washing, cannot provide.

Mark 7:17 When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable.

It was a "parable" in that Jesus was using eating and digestion as an illustration of a spiritual truth.

Mark 7:18 So He said to them, "Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him,

Mark 7:19 "because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?"

Jesus mildly rebukes His boys. They ought to be getting some of this, by now.

I mentioned earlier that a Christian is a work in progress. A key word in that is 'progress.' I should be growing, maturing. I should be *getting* more of what the Lord is teaching me.

The parable was perfect. Our food goes right through us, having no effect on the heart. Ritual washing makes no difference.

The further conclusion, and this was revolutionary to Jews, is that you can eat *anything* you want. By saying "purifying all foods," Jesus was declaring everything Kosher.

My Jewish friend, go get a bacon burger. Just make sure the food server washed his or her hands - but for hygiene, *not* holiness.

Mark 7:20 And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man.

Mark 7:21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders,

Mark 7:22 "thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.

Mark 7:23 "All these evil things come from within and defile a man."

This is no Pixar movie; this is X-rated stuff. While these words can describe outward actions, Jesus says they are things in our hearts - whether we ever perform them or not.

He started with "evil thoughts." William Barclay said, "every outward act of sin is preceded by an inward act of choice; therefore Jesus begins with the evil thought from which the evil action comes."

"Adulteries [and] fornications" are the sinful sexual thoughts of both the married and the unmarried.

"Murders" is the anger we find in our hearts.

"Thefts" is the desire we have to steal. Before you say you have no such desire, I should point out that this word describes things like laziness on the job, which robs your employer; and squandering your resources, which robs God.

"Covetousness" is the desire to possess someone else's property, or even their spouse.

"Wickedness" is devising evil plans, whether you carry them out or not.

"Deceit" includes all kinds of lying.

"Lewdness" is ignoring moral restraints and imagining immoral actions.

"An evil eye" is jealousy and envy.

"Blasphemy" is defamation of character, railing, slander, scornful and insolent language directed against another person, whether it be addressed to him directly or spoken behind his back.

"Pride" is thinking more highly of yourself than you ought to.

"Foolishness" is disregarding the wisdom of God.

It should be obvious that no amount of ritual hand washing - or any observance of days or diets - can effect these pre-existing inward defilements.

That's a good way to understand what Jesus was saying. Because we are the descendants of original parents who sinned in the Garden of Eden, we have a pre-existing condition, a sin nature, that expresses itself the way Jesus described it.

We need transforming from within. We need not heart surgery, but a new heart, a new nature.

We get it when we trust Jesus to save us. We become partakers of His divine nature; God the Holy Spirit comes to live within us. We are empowered to say "No" to the things listed here, and elsewhere, that are left-over in our flesh, and to say "Yes" to God.

There is something intensely practical in Jesus' description that we can miss because of translation. It's implied in the word "thoughts."

"Thoughts" can be translated *dialog*, or *debate*. Jesus was describing a self-dialog or, if you will, talking to yourself.

If you don't like the idea of talking to yourself, I guess we could say it means thinking.

What do you think about? All the things Jesus listed, and many other evil things, remain in your heart, in your mind, after you are saved, and you can easily default to them. They were your original operating system, so it can feel comfortable to indulge them.

Outwardly you read your Bible, you pray, you attend church, you serve the Lord. That's great - but those can be mere outward rituals, no better than hand washing, if your thinking is evil.

Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote a book called *The Invisible War*. In it he described, among other struggles, the battle for your mind, and that battle is vicious. It is intense. It is unrelenting.

Jay Adams wrote a book, calling our inner struggle *The War Within*.

There's a battle, a war, within us, as believers.

But it is winnable. In Second Corinthians 10:5 we're commanded to, "take every thought captive to obey Christ."

- "Captive" means *to control, to conquer, to bring into submission*.
- "Obey" means *to bring into submission, to bring under control*.

You are in a winnable war, but you've got to realize, once and for all, the real battleground isn't in your outward behavior; it's in your mind.

I'll close with this quote from Adrian Rogers:

If we stay in love with the Lord Jesus Christ, there won't be any room for those filthy, dirty, wicked, lascivious, lustful, prideful thoughts that bombard us all. You see, God made us so that we can't think two thoughts at one time. If we're thinking what's right, we can't possibly be thinking what's wrong.