

**Mark:  
Clean on the Inside**

**Mark 7:1-23**

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Now turn with me, if you would, to the Gospel of Mark. And we find ourselves this evening in chapter seven—the Gospel of Mark, chapter seven, and we will be looking together at the first twenty-three verses of this Gospel.

You will remember that previously we were looking at these two extraordinary miracles: the feeding of the five thousand, and then Jesus' walking on the Sea of Galilee. And then, at the end of chapter six there's an account of something close to what we might call a revival that takes place in the towns, and cities, and in the countryside in Galilee and the northwest section of Galilee. And there are multitudes of people now coming to Jesus bringing their sick ones and loved ones, and imploring Him that He might touch them; that they might even just reach out and touch the hem of His garment. And the closing testimony of chapter six: "...and as many as touched it [that is, His garment] were made well."

And an extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit is upon every aspect now of Jesus' preaching and teaching and healing ministry. No longer is Jesus able to say or do anything in a small little corner. Whatever He does now is wide open, it's known everywhere. And as we shall see, the folks from Jerusalem are getting a little antsy, and we'll read in a second or two of the Pharisees and of the teachers of the law, or the scribes, who come up from Jerusalem to check out exactly what's going on up in northern Galilee.

Now before we read the Scriptures together, let's seek God's face once again in prayer. Let's pray.

*Our gracious God and ever blessed Father, we thank You for Your word that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit; and we need Your help now as we read and seek to understand Your word. We want it to affect us deeply in our hearts and in our souls, that we might not just be hearers only, but that we might be doers of Your word. And this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Hear with me, then, the word of God.

(1) And the Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered together around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." He was also saying to them, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death;: but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by is corban (that is to say, given to God), you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." And after He called the multitude to Him again, He began saying to them 'Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: 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." If any man has ears to hear, let him hear. And when leaving the multitude, He had entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and fornication, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now, every now and then you get the impression that the folk in Jerusalem—down south a hundred miles or so, south from where Jesus is currently ministering—the headquarters of Judaism in the first century—every now and again you get the impression that these folk in Jerusalem were growing deeply suspicious of Jesus. Who is He? Who is He, claiming what He's claiming, and all of the stories now that must have been filtering down to Jerusalem about some of the miracles that

He had been performing.

It was always a difficult task—difficult relationship for the Jews, and particularly for those in authority in Jerusalem—to live in what was to all intents and purposes an occupied land, with all of the forces, the input of a foreign culture impinging itself upon the ways and the customs of the Jews; trying to insure that the ways and the cultural norms of the Gentiles weren't beginning to encroach upon the way the Jews did things, especially when it came to issues of religion, and especially how things were performed in the ritual of worship in the temple. And keeping tabs on things in Jerusalem was one thing, but keeping tabs on things way up north in Galilee was even more difficult; and the news about Jesus' claims to be the Messiah, the fact now that thousands and perhaps tens of thousands of people were following Jesus wherever He went, listening to His every word, bringing sick folk to Him—all of this had come to the attention of the Pharisees and the scribes, the teachers of the law in Jerusalem.

Well, the grammar of chapter seven, verse one, is a “PhD Dissertation” in itself, but some think that the Pharisees were actually northern Pharisees, that they were from Galilee, and just the scribes are coming up from Jerusalem; and others say, no, both the Pharisees and the scribes are coming up from Jerusalem. I have no interest in finding out which of those two is true, except that the Pharisees and the scribes together—and sometimes they were at loggerheads, but now when it comes to opposing Jesus they were on the same page. And they've come up. Their presence, southern folk in northern Galilee, you folk can readily appreciate the sensitivities, their very presence would rankle just ordinary Jews, let alone the disciples. And it was meant to rankle. They had come...it was like, I suppose, the equivalent of “the Feds” coming into town, you know, and taking over. And there was obviously a spirit of suspicion, and of conspiracy and of opposition, and not a little of distrust.

The Pharisees had come into existence, along with the scribes along a somewhat different route, but they'd been in existence for several hundred years, possibly now three hundred years from the time of Jesus here in the gospels, and they've come into existence partly because of the encroachments of the foreign invaders, the successive invaders that had come into Judea and into Israel.

And because of the influence of these foreign cultures, the scribes, especially, had interpreted, and re-interpreted, and re-interpreted the laws of Moses, and had developed a tradition of how religion was to be performed, and certain rituals now that had become part of the traditional way of doing things. It wasn't written down anywhere, it was all passed on by an elaborate oral tradition.

They had laws about all kinds of things, especially about Sabbath observance—some immensely complicated rules and regulations about how to observe the Sabbath: how far you could walk, or what things you could do and couldn't do,

and so on. And lots and lots of rules and regulations about eating, about hygiene, and about ceremonial aspects of when Jews were coming into contact with Gentiles—Gentiles who in Jewish minds would be unclean, and therefore their utensils would be unclean, and certainly their foods would be unclean. And so you've got this elaborate ritual that has developed over the years.

Well, that's all background. It's lunchtime! And the disciples, Jesus' disciples, are obviously eating. We have no idea what it was they were eating, but they were hungry no doubt, and they just chomped into whatever it was that was for lunch that day. And the scribes have immediately noticed that they're not doing something. They haven't washed their hands. They're ignorant of basic Jewish customs, ritualistic customs, dealing with ceremonial cleanliness in the sight of God. They were behaving like Gentiles. And who is this Jesus? He's obviously unfit to be leading Judaism into these expectations of the return, or the coming, of Messiah. And that's their accusation.

Now, it raises some very important issues, and let's see if we can't tease out a few of them from the passage that's before us this evening.

### **I. How easily man becomes enslaved to the opinions of men rather than the laws of God.**

The first thing I want to see is this: it teaches us how easily man becomes enslaved to the opinions of men rather than the laws of God. How easily men become enslaved to the opinions of men. Now, I know that some of you are thinking all of this talk here by the scribes about needing to wash your hands before you eat sounds very reasonable. After all, don't you teach your children to wash their hands before they have lunch here at the Day School, or wherever it is your children are going to school? That's something that you do. I remember having to write out a hundred times "Cleanliness is next to godliness" when I was a little boy, because of some misdemeanor that I had engaged in. Some of you now are buying these little anti-bacterial bottles, you know, from Body Wash, or Bath and Body Works or whatever it is, and you carry them around with you because you're concerned about issues of hygiene and issues of purity. What's all the fuss here about the scribes telling these disciples they should have washed their hands before eating?

Well, you misunderstand what's going on here. It's got nothing to do with hygiene. It had everything to do with ritual cleanliness in the sight of God. What they were imposing on their fellow men were religious obligations, with all the issues of conscience that go with that. What we have here is *legalism*.

Now, that's a word that some people apply too quickly. Some people apply the word legalism because they don't want to have to obey God, because they find the laws of God inconvenient; because the laws of God are in some way

impinging upon their comfort zone, and it's easy to throw out the word "legalism." And people do it, and Christians do it who should know better. To obey God's law is one thing. When God says something to you, you're not in a position to quibble about it. You and I, we're not in a position to debate should we obey this or should we not? And if we obey this that God has asked of me, is that going to be legalistic? We're not in a position to quibble about that. If God has said to me I must do this, then I must do this.

But that's not the issue here. It's not something which God had required. This is something which the scribes had conjured up. This is part of the traditions of men. These are laws of men. And laws of men are not just the kind of laws that we have in the realm, say, of the state. When you drive home, if you go up I-55, you know, when you get onto I-55 from here—you may go up the street here and turn right, and then you get onto I-55—there are those little white posts now, stuck in the middle of the road. And they're there to prevent you from crossing over to go to Lakeland, and you mustn't do as somebody did last Wednesday night leaving this prayer meeting. Now, that was a violation of the laws of the state. It was a no-no. You shouldn't do that. We're to obey the state in all matters, except when the state is asking us to do something which is in violation of something that God has said. And then you apply what Peter applies in the Acts of the Apostles, and obey God rather than men.

But that's not what we've got here. We've got men imposing man-made laws for religious significance upon other men. And of all people, Presbyterians especially should understand the significance of that. Our own *Westminster Confession*, our own *Shorter Catechism* and *Larger Catechism* and the *Directory for the Public Worship of God*, especially those documents from the 1640s emerged because of an issue just like this: that men, the state, were legislating not about crossing I-55 onto Lakeland, but legislating the way we worship God, and saying that if you don't worship God this way, you're in violation and penal sanctions are going to follow. And what did the forefathers of this church do in the 1640s? They enacted the principle that when it comes to issues like that, we obey God rather than men. And one of the most marvelous sentences in the entire *Westminster Confession of Faith* speaks directly to this issue here:

"God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men."

And that's exactly what Jesus is saying here. You're worshiping the traditions of men! And you're bowing down, you're bowing down your conscience to man-made legislation when it comes to the worship of God. Now, on another occasion it might have been profitable to have, you know, the hygiene debate: Is it a good thing to wash your hands before eating food? Answer: Yes, it probably is. (So long as you don't get really nutty about it, it's probably a good thing.) But in this context, in this religious context, Jesus is saying "No" to the traditions of men. How easy—it would be interesting to take that down a little road now, and just to

see how easily we fall prey to the commandments of men and ignore the commandments of God.

But let me see a second thing, tease a second thing out of this passage. It shows us how easily we become enslaved by man's opinions rather than God's.

## **II. It shows us the nature of true worship.**

Look at what Jesus says in verse six, and He's quoting from the prophet Isaiah: "These people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me." It was a religion, first of all, that was based on wrong authority, the authority of men; but more than that, it was a superficial religion. It was an external religion. It was a religion of words, but it wasn't a religion based on the heart.

Do you notice the word that Jesus applies? It was hypocrisy. You're hypocrites, Jesus says. It is a strong word now, and it was a strong word then. They're going through the outward motions of ceremonial worship, but the whole thing is empty. There's no grasping of the Lord, there's no wrestling with God like Jacob—"I will not let you go until You bless me." It's like singing a hymn in our worship service, and your lips are moving—or perhaps they're barely moving—but the heart isn't engaged at all. You're a million miles away. You're thinking about something that you have to do tomorrow, or you're thinking about when is this going to be over so that I can play golf. Or ...you're not engaged. The heart is not engaged. That's what Jesus is talking about here.

They were concerned about washing their hands, and there was an entire ritual. There was certain water that had to be stored in certain jars, and the hands had to be held up in a certain way and the water had to run down past the wrists, and you had to do it several times in the course of a meal, in between each part of the meal; each course, you had to go through this ritual again.

And Jesus is saying there's no heart in this. This is all external. It's all on the outside. And He brings it home. He uses an illustration. It's a little odd, and a little strange to us, at least on the surface it is. It's about the situation of honoring your father and your mother. How do we do that so that it least inconveniences us? How do you keep the fifth commandment? And the scribes had come up with a formula that if you had some money—and of course, they had no social welfare or anything of that kind; no Social Security, no Medicare or anything like that whatsoever...no insurance policies or anything like that at all— and so children were obligated financially to look after their parents. And it was one thing to look after, you know, a wonderful mother who lives just a mile away and is sweet and caring and thoughtful, no problems whatsoever; but it is another thing when the parent is a real nuisance, and senile and angry. And what about the divorced ones? And what about the really messy ones?

And so the scribes came up with this formula. You sign a note and you devote all of your money to the Lord. Now you still hold onto it, that was the neat thing. You didn't actually give it away; it was still in your possession. But technically it belonged to the Lord, and when parents asked for help, you would just say, "Sorry—Corban. My money is all devoted to the Lord. Can't give it to you."

Now it sounds horrible, it sounds thoughtless. And Jesus is using that as the illustration of the way that they're approaching worship. It was outward, it was ceremonial, but it was hypocritical!

Now every one of us reading that illustration about looking after parents—I'm ashamed, I'm embarrassed even trying to explain to you the connivance involved in trying to get out of their responsibility to look after their parents—but Jesus' point is, you know, that's the way we treat God. We give Him the off-scouring, we give Him the leftovers. We give Him the bits that aren't inconvenience to us. And my friend, Jesus calls it hypocrisy. And my friends, Jesus hates hypocrisy when we play at religion, when we sing His praises with our lips but our hearts—our *hearts* are far from God.

Do you see what Jesus is doing? He's giving us an indicator of what true worship actually is. And true worship is from the heart. If we went to the book of Psalms tonight and saw how the psalmist speaks of true religion, the true religion consists of a brokenness of spirit: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit"; and, "A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."... Or when the psalmist speaks about the longings and the desires that are part of true religion: "As the hart [the deer] longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul, O Lord, for Thee." "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none on earth that I desire besides Thee. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." And so on we could explore from the Psalms the nature of true religion. And what it boils down to is engagement of the heart—the engagement of the inner soul, the engagement of our beings in its deepest and most fundamental level. Not just lip service. Not just outward attendance. Not just physical presence at the means of grace, but the involvement of the heart.

Oh, friends, what a rebuke that is! What a rebuke that is to our worship tonight, and very often our worship on the Lord's Day, where our heart is disengaged and we long more for the things of this world than we do for the blessings of Almighty God. And that sense of pouring out your hearts in prayer...let's long for that. Let's pray to God for that. Let's confess our sins in this area, that God's Spirit might come down upon us and that we might be a people who are known for heart worship—heart worship! And it's got more than just loud music—and you know, people equate that with external gestures, and gestures of hand-waving and dancing and all the rest of it. And Jesus isn't saying anything like that. He's saying, 'Is your heart engaged? Is your heart engaged?'

Well, there's a third thing that I wanted us to see, and that is that it shows us how shallow a concept of sin these Pharisees had. And not just the Pharisees, but how shallow a view of sin the disciples had.

### **III. It shows our shallow view of sin.**

And Jesus begins by speaking about food, and He says it's not what goes into a man that defiles, but it's what comes out of a man. And then He moves into somebody's house and He continues the conversation there. Now, not with the multitude who didn't understand what He was saying, but what's surprising is not that the multitude didn't understand, and not that the Pharisees and the scribes didn't understand what Jesus was saying; but what's surprising is that the disciples seemingly didn't understand what He was saying, and they had to ask Him, 'What did You mean by that parable, that it's what comes out of a man that defiles, not what goes into a man'?

One imagines here, of course...what is Jesus doing? And Jesus is doing here something different from what He was doing in the first part of the passage. He's criticizing the traditions of the scribes. In this part, He is actually abrogating the law of the Old Testament, the ceremonial law of the Old Testament dealing with foods that were clean and unclean. And Mark gives you a sort of signal about that, because he puts it in a sort of parenthetical remark at the end of verse 19: "Thus He declared all foods clean." That for whatever purpose, and there was a purpose in the Old Testament economy for separating certain foods, there were certain foods that you couldn't have: pork chops, right? In the Old Testament it wouldn't be on the menu. You just couldn't have that. But that has been abrogated. Now whatever the reason why, there's a reason for that, and we need to appreciate the fundamental reason why God would come to Old Testament Israel and teach them like as though they were little children, and give them laws that are almost picture-laws in very vivid, simple ways, so that we could have some kind of appreciation that some things are clean and some things are ceremonially unclean; because God was teaching them of the fundamental character of sin.

But something happens when you come into the new covenant, and Jesus sets those aside. Do you see, my friends, only Jesus could do that? Only God could set aside the laws of God, and that in itself was a testimony that Jesus was claiming to be God and setting aside those ceremonial laws. I sort of wonder...Mark's gospel is probably written in the early 60's according to tradition, just before Peter was put to death in Rome. Peter is the one who is dictating, or at least whispering in Mark's ear, much of the account, and you remember, this was a problem for Peter. And I sort of want to hear, and I want to see Peter's face as he's telling Mark this particular story. You know, Jesus said that there's no such thing as unclean food anymore, because Peter didn't get it. Peter didn't get it. It took Peter a long time to get that, even though he was given a vision in



Joppa about a sheet with all kinds of animals, clean and unclean, abrogating those ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. But still in Galatians 2, when it came down to it, because of the pressure of fellow Jews he separated himself from the Gentiles and their pork chops, and went instead and ate only kosher food. And Paul, you remember, has to withstand him to the face.

How shallow a view of sin we have. How shallow a view of sin we have. He's teaching here what the ceremonial laws were actually designed to do: teach us about sin. Teach us about sin. What this says is that even those who are true believers are often superficial, even people like Peter. Even people like Peter. They only have a surface acquaintance with sin.

Holiness is more than clean food. Food cannot change the heart. It's the heart that really matters. It's the heart that really matters. Out of the heart, Jesus says, proceed evil thoughts and lustful thoughts, and thefts and murders and so on. What a list! What a list that is! And those come out of our hearts--our wretched, sinful, disgusting hearts. That's why, my friends, in order to gain entry into the kingdom of God we need a new heart. A new heart: isn't that the promise of the new covenant in Ezekiel? "I will give to you a new heart." And my friends, if you have that new heart tonight, guard it. Guard that heart, because out of it are the issues of life. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart, Jesus says.

Well, let's leave that there. Let's pray together.

*Our Father, we thank You for Your word. It teaches us deep things, things that we need to learn and relearn and relearn. We know our hearts so little, and we are very conscious that left unguarded and left without the ministry of Your Spirit, out of our hearts proceed all manner of things that would shame us. We thank You for the new hearts, and we bless you now for the ministry of Your Spirit that enables us so to render worship that is acceptable to You. But Lord, we pray for Your blessing, for so very often the good that we would, we do not; and the evil that we would not, that we find that we do. So take hold of us, individually and corporately, and may our worship resound to Your praise and to Your glory for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand, receive the Lord's benediction.

*Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.*

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