

Love or Lip Service?

Mark 7:1-23

Since 1989, competitors have gathered in south central Illinois for the annual *Tour de Donut*, a 32-mile bicycle race with two designated donut stops along the route. One rides for time, but, five minutes are taken off that time for each donut consumed. It's a biathlon consisting of cycling and speed-eating. One winner completed the course in 31 minutes. That, of course, factors in a 1½ hour donut credit. Who knows how great traditions are born, but this one has spawned copy-cat events in Texas, Utah and Ohio. With what Jim Ressler knows about cycling and what the Pastoral Team knows about eating donuts, we might set up a training center here.

Of course, some traditions, especially, traditions of a religious nature, do not always generate such consensus good will. It is easy to get judgmental. Some churches are more traditional than us, some less so. Some wrongly place "holy tradition" on a par with Scripture, and practices with no biblical foundation find their way into the church. But, other traditions are effectively used to portray biblical truths. We might smirk at a church that follows a worship liturgy that, to us, seems dead and dry. But to focus on that is to miss the fact that every church settles into some kind of liturgy and cannot help but to be somewhat tradition-bound. And, our traditions can, just like everyone else's, either enhance or obscure a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ.

Tradition is not always an enemy steeped in legalism, but sinful hearts are a threat all the time. Examine your heart. You may be a person who resents every perceived threat to your cherished traditions or, you may be in the process of nurturing a legalistic spirit of "anti-traditionalism." Not only do you not hold onto traditions, you despise them all and you're sure pretty God does too. Much of what passes itself off as contemporary evangelism and worship is, in fact, little more than what might be called "a chronological snobbery," driven by the idea that if it's old, it's bad.

Anti-traditionalism does not accurately reflect the spirit of Jesus. In our text, He will harshly indict certain Pharisees for their distorted affection for tradition, but He never condemned tradition *per se*. He only condemned that which obscured and displaced God's truth. The "traditions of the elders" in Jesus' day were thought to secure spiritual purity for a man. Jesus rejected that notion. Purity is a matter of the heart, and while religious tradition and meaningful rituals can reflect the intent of a heart trying to be pure, they might conceal a hypocrite.

I. A Controversy over Spiritual Purity Evolves (1-4)

A. The Twelve Eat on the Run verses 1, 2

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.

According to Mark, demanding crowds have taken a toll on Jesus and His men. Once, Jesus had worked so hard that He failed to take time to eat. His family thought He was "losing it" and came to take Him away. Immediately before the feeding of the 5000, the Twelve were unable to catch a bite due to the crowds. After that miracle, twelve baskets of leftovers were collected. Scholars "wax eloquent" about the symbolic meanings behind those twelve baskets, and I'm open to their ideas. But, could there also be a very practical conclusion to be drawn? Every first-century Jew routinely carried such a basket when traveling. There were twelve hungry Apostles who tended to miss meals when serving others. Hmm. Every Mothers Day, the men of the church wait tables for the ladies, but when they go off to their little program, we scarf down the leftovers.

They left the scene of the miracle and arrived at a town called Gennesaret, only to be swarmed by another needy crowd. Perhaps, they now sneaked a meal when they could, and were seen eating (possibly from their baskets of fish and bread) without washing their hands. Pharisees and teachers of the law from Jerusalem presumed that the disciples of Jesus were indifferent to “cleanness”, at least, to the pharisaic notion of cleanness. Their idea of “unclean” meant “common or profane”, not “dirty or soiled”. They understood very little of germs and hygiene.

A principal of a middle school in Beaverton, Oregon had a problem with some older girls and lipstick. When applying it in the bathroom, they would press their lips to the mirror and leave lip prints. To stop it before it got out of hand, he gathered the girls in the ladies room. The custodian was there too. The principal explained that the young ladies did not understand just how much work they were creating for the poor custodian. They needed to see for themselves how hard it was to clean a mirror. On cue, the custodian took a brush, dipped it in the nearest toilet and washed the lipstick from the mirror. That was the last day any lip prints were left on the mirror.

These fact-finders from Jerusalem were worried not about germs, but about ritualistic washings passed down as “the tradition of the elders.” These “elders” were not the local synagogue rulers also called elders. These elders were highly-esteemed and, usually, long-dead rabbis, who wielded such respect that their practices became fixtures on the religious landscape for years to come.

B. Mark Explains the Controversy to His Readers verses 3, 4

... 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.)

This was useful data as Mark records Peter’s memoirs for Romans, who would think, “How dumb!” To follow the story, they had to appreciate how much such rituals meant to the Jews. This hand-washing ritual was tedious and time-consuming. It required very precise procedures and a minimum quantity of water in order to be valid. Orthodox Jews like the Pharisees engaged in this ritual before and after every meal. The most orthodox ones repeated this procedure between courses. For the Pharisees, to fail to observe this washing was more than just bad manners. It was grievous sin. It was to reveal a crass indifference to the holiness of God.

They also washed after spending time in the marketplace, because Gentles and careless Jews frequented the marketplace. “Wash” in verse four is a different word than the one that described the hand-washings. *Baptizo*, from which we get “baptize,” meant to immerse something completely. The Pharisees took a bath every time they returned from the marketplace before they would even eat ... pretty snooty, I think. They also had rituals for their eating utensils. Can you see what Jesus was up against as He attempted to address the hearts of sinners with a message about real purity in a world where religion was primarily a matter of external rites?

II. A Confrontation about Spiritual Purity Explodes (5-13)

A. It’s Not Always *WHAT* You Ask, but *HOW* You Ask It verse 5

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?”

Did you catch what a loaded question that was? It's a little like: "Have you stopped beating your wife?" And the good is ...? The premise of the Pharisee's question was that not following the elders' traditions equaled to spiritual indifference. "Why don't you guys choose to honor God by washing your hands?" Jesus did not engage in their traditions, but He understood and cared more about what honors His Father than did any of His accusers. He rejected their premise.

Moses did not require hand-washing before meals. Some rabbi with good intentions may have initiated the ritual as a neat way to acknowledge the presence of the Giver of all things when we eat. We do not have to blame the rabbis themselves for the legalism of later generations. Jesus never condemned these traditions or the elders that started them. He condemned the practice of imposing them as God's law, even to the point of overlooking God's actual law. But that is what legalism does. It dares to speak for God as though He did not think to speak for Himself.

Legalism says, "Do this or you're out of God's will," and, again, the spirit of the legalist is not limited to the old-school traditionalist. The innovator who fancies himself as a "cutting-edge change-agent" can be just as overbearing about his own perceptions of what God requires and just as intolerant when challenged. Legalism is a spirit that hems others into someone's perception of God's will, but all it really does is to dispense doubt and fear. Legalism of every ilk arrogantly professes to represent God's mind, but it never can really cash the check biblically.

B. How Did Jesus Use the Term "Hypocrite"? verses 6-13

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."

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 your own traditions! ¹⁰For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' 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."

Jesus did not toss the term "hypocrite" around as lightly as many do. Those in the world, who resist the prompting of God to come to Him in repentance, often look to the church and indict the whole community as "a bunch of hypocrites". There *IS* hypocrisy in the church. There may even be a degree of hypocrisy in most of us when we often hide sins and burdens that we would surely be better served sharing. However, as we mature, we learn the value of greater authenticity.

Jesus defined the hypocrite that angered Him by appealing to the prophet Isaiah. This hypocrite speaks lovingly of God, but the ethic of his life proves that his heart is greatly estranged from God. He worships in vain. He believes that the charade of piety that may or may not fool men works with God. His worship is useless. Finally, Isaiah indicts this hypocrite as one who nullifies God's commands. In other words, he observes the external rites and speaks the rhetoric that could reflect spiritual purity, but he finds ways to not be personally bound by the commandments of God.

Moses *REQUIRED* that children honor their parents. The Israelites understood this to include caring for them when the role of provider and caregiver shifted away from aging parents to the adult child, usually the oldest son. A despicable son could weasel out of helping his parents by dedicating his money to God. This dedication, or *Corban*, did not limit how a man could use his money. He could spend it on himself so long as he justified it as a righteous expense. Note verse 12: "then **you** no longer let him do anything for his father or mother." That means that even if this rotten son repented and was now determined to help Mom and Pop, the Pharisees would step in and forbid him from doing so, once he had declared the money *Corban*, or "off limits".

God's Law was sacrificed to that tradition or nullified by that tradition. This was one example. Jesus could have cited among hundreds, adding: "And you do many things like that."

C. Legalism Creates More Problems than It Solves

When a hotel in Galveston, Texas was actually built over the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, someone thought, "What if people try to fish out of the windows?" So, signs were posted in the rooms: "No fishing out the hotel windows." People ignored the signs, however, and it created problems. Lines got snarled. Fish were seen flapping against the restaurant's picture windows. The hotel manager solved it all by taking down the signs. Who checks into a hotel room thinking about fishing out of the window? The law, created the problem by giving people the idea!

Jesus seemed to believe that if men really sought to love God with all of their being, if they truly endeavored to love others as themselves and if they trusted Him for the strength to do those things, then, the details of life would fall together in a perfectly acceptable manner. "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:22). Legalism does not trust people to seek God's mind that way. It must spell out everything.

Liberty has risks. It is one thing to throw off the shackles of other people's rules, but remember we are still bound by the shackles of our love for God. If you look for reasons to sin and to live as you please, shame on you. I'll keep preaching liberty, but I must also remind you that God sees through that: "God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7).

III. A Conclusion about Spiritual Purity Endures (14-23)

A. Jesus Said a Scandalously Provocative Thing verses 14-19

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.'"

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.")

This was daring. Jesus gathered a crowd not only to teach them, but also to publicly expose these powerful Pharisees as hypocrites. The uncleanness of a man begins within him. Jesus' disciples were so entrenched in their own preconceptions about "cleanness" as a matter of outward behavior that they did not follow Him. In private, He bluntly accused them of mental laziness.

Did they not understand by this time that their Master was more concerned about the things that resided in their hearts than He was about the food products that they put in their mouths? If the inside, the heart, is not pure, no outer charade of purity means anything. Jesus redefined righteousness, which is a heart for God and the things of God and not a performance for the eyes of men who only see the outer show. One needs not *DO* adultery to be an adulterer at heart. One needs not *DO* murder to be a killer. One needs not *DO* unkindness to have a calloused heart.

B. The Heart of All Matters Is the Heart verses 20-23

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."

The human heart needs cleaning before any man can walk with God. And, once God has touched our hearts, we need to guard them so that He can continue to purify them.

Does this idea that inner righteousness and purity are more important than their outward expressions mean that the outward does not matter? Are external acts of worship unnecessary? Is rhetoric irrelevant? Are all traditions and rituals flawed and superfluous? Jesus' emphasis on the heart means only that the heart is the starting point that lends authenticity to every outward expression of faith. If my heart is right, I *MUST* still worship outwardly, and better than ever.

"Suppose a husband asks his wife if he must kiss her good night ... worship is a must. But not that kind of must. Not the kind that says, 'I don't want to but if I must I will.' That will not do in kissing, and it will not do in worshipping. (They are very closely related!) There is no value in a kiss or an act of worship that does not come from the heart." - John Piper

What is true of worship is true of all Christian "duty" for lack of a better word. Must you give? Yes, you must give but it must be the right kind of must. Love must sacrifice from a cheerful heart. Must you use your gifts from God to serve Him? Yes, you must but with the must of a loving servant, not a slavish one. Must you learn all of God's truth that can and discipline yourself to resist temptation? Yes, you really must, but from love, not the must of fear. You absolutely must tend to these matters. But remember, true worship is like a kiss. A Christian "must" is not the must of dutiful obligation. It is the must of being in love with Jesus.