

Rules Or Relationship?

by Mark Jarvinen

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus ² and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

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.

⁴ When 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.)

⁵ So 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 defiled hands?”

⁶ He 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.*

*⁷ They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.’*

⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.” ...

¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” ...

*²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” **(Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)***

INTRODUCTION

Most of us are familiar with the musical theater classic, **Fiddler on the Roof**. Set in Imperial Russia in 1905, this heartwarming story centers around Tevye, a Jewish father of five daughters and his

attempts to maintain his religion with all its traditions. A milkman from the small village of Anatevka, where making a living is difficult, Tevye asks himself why he stays. He answers himself, “**Because it’s our home.**” He continues his musings, asking himself, “**How do we keep our balance?**” He answers with one word – “**TRADITION.**” To the question, “**How did our traditions start?**” Tevye replies, “**I’ll tell you – I don’t know, but it’s tradition. Because of our traditions everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.**” As the play unfolds, Tevye remains faithful to his traditions even when, in terms of his relationships, they seem to do more harm than good.

THE CONFLICT

Tevye and his traditions are a great introduction to today’s gospel lesson. **Mark 7:5** says -

“So 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 defiled hands?’”

Now before we go any further, let’s give the Pharisees and the Scribes in our text their due. The emphasis on hand washing had to have come from somewhere within the Law of Moses, and we see from **Exodus 30** that the priests who were engaged in tabernacle service were required to wash their hands. Afterwards, when the priests brought a portion of an animal sacrifice home to eat, their whole households were then required to wash their hands before partaking (**Numbers 18**). Fast-forward to about 500 years before Jesus’ day and here’s what the Elders among the Jews in effect were saying:

“When it comes to the Law, more is better. If the priests have to wash their hands when handling sacrifices, let’s mandate that all the people (not only the priests) should always wash their hands before eating; and not just before eating meat used for holy offerings, but before eating all food.”

In other words, the Elders started their own traditions, rules that regulated Israel’s life down to the smallest details. They reasoned as follows:

“If what’s at stake is devotion to God, let’s go beyond what Moses said. Let’s show all the people how practical and attainable the Law can be in every day life.”

So they put into effect **“Operation Cleanliness is Next to Godliness”** and provided precise guidance for laypeople on when, where, and how to wash their hands, among other things. They said, ***“Let’s show our devotion to God by making a conscious effort to set ourselves apart from the pagan influences of the `unwashed hordes’ living around us.”***

JESUS’ RESPONSE

In v. 6, Jesus isn’t buying what the Pharisees and Scribes are selling. When Jesus and his disciples sat down to eat, I’m sure they said grace, ☺ but like comparative slobs, they apparently didn’t wash their hands, their pots, kettles, utensils or anything that the traditions of the Elders required. Furthermore, because the Pharisees and Scribes questioned their etiquette, Jesus calls them **“hypocrites,”** in other words, **“pretenders,”** or **“people whose own actions don’t live up to their words.”** Jesus simply wasn’t thrilled with their approach to the Law.

Jesus is on a roll. He’s just getting warmed up. In vv. 6-7, he quotes **Isaiah 29:13 –**

“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”

Paraphrasing Jesus’ response, He says, ***“For real, guys? You want to talk about hand-washing? I can think of a million weightier issues pertaining to our faith than this!”*** Obviously, religion had become an end in itself to the Pharisees and Scribes. In **v. 8**, Jesus says to them, ***“You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”*** The Pharisees and Scribes of Jesus’ day, in their respect and admiration for the traditions set forth by the Elders of the Hebrew faith, had turned holiness and purity into matters of ritual correctness rather than moral integrity, something infinitely more manageable and under their own control. Over the centuries, Judaism had become a very **“clean”** religion. The Pharisees and Scribes were committed to doing their part in order to ensure that their religion was set apart from every other religion in terms of what the eye could see.

RULES OR RELATIONSHIP?

This emphasis on outward purity has endured through the ages. For example, in the church of medieval times, certain priests would beat their own bodies, deny themselves pleasure, walk around shoeless and poorly dressed, hoping to cleanse their bodies of sinful thoughts and actions. In fact, as a young monk, Martin Luther was obsessed with atoning for his own sins and went to extreme lengths to punish himself. This ranged from radical forms of self-denial, physical and mental tests, and even self-flagellation. One such self-punishment consisted of young Luther lying in the snow through the

night, at the height of winter, until, with the help of others from within the monastery, he would have to be carried back inside.
(www.pbs.org/empires/martinluther/cheats.html)

Legalism is still around today, particularly in religious circles where ritual and appearance are emphasized. Some demonstrate it by taking pride in not eating meat on Fridays, or by doing missionary work dressed in white shirts and ties, even on hot days. Others do it by wearing skirts below their knees, by refraining from attending movies, or watching TV, assuming that God will be more pleased with them as a result. Still others strive for purity by boycotting establishments that support unapproved products or practices. The quest for cleanliness can take on myriad forms in our complex culture. But suffice it to say, any lifestyle choice or ethical decision that draws too tight a circle around oneself and one's own sense of rightness, or leaves one thinking **"God must be happy with me now!"** just may be someone for whom life has become more about religion or rule-keeping than a relationship with God.

Turning back to our text, Jesus saw that the Law was being used to turn people away from God by being so exacting and burdensome, instead of it being used to bring people into the sphere of His love and mercy. Jesus goes on to say in v. 15 -

"Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."

In other words, it's not contact with what's outside of a person that makes him or her unclean, but it's what is in a person's heart that matters. The Pharisees and Scribes of our text were using the

traditions of men to gain respect, leveraging these rules as tools for their own wealth and power, rather than as aids to a worship of God that flowed from their hearts. In taking on the Pharisees and Scribes, Jesus was freeing people from the tyranny of externals, giving them the freedom to live with the law of love in their hearts.

THE DAGGER IN THE HEART

Jesus drives the dagger into the heart of externals based religion when speaking to His disciples in **vv. 20-23**:

“What comes out of a man is what makes him `unclean.’ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

What was Jesus getting at? Paraphrasing, He’s simply saying,

“If you want to rid yourself of evil, you’re starting at the wrong spot! Instead of worrying about what’s outside you, look at what’s INSIDE you. You’ve got a heart that is pouring out greed, vulgarities, envy, slander, arrogance, and all kinds of garbage. If you really want to be clean, you need a spiritual heart transplant.”

Remember **King David’s prayer** in Psalm 51? After his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband, Uriah, David prays in **51:10** – ***“Create in me a pure HEART, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”*** When the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin we get to the heart of the matter. Man-made religion is crushed when the human heart is exposed. Turning off the TV, packing meals for the hungry, or tithing on our gross instead of our net, all become inconsequential if those are the kinds of things we’ve been counting on to produce our own clean hearts, and thereby

impressing God. No matter how hard we try to cleanse ourselves outwardly, our hearts are still sinful and there's NOTHING we, in ourselves, can do about it. **Jeremiah 17:9** sums it up rather succinctly:

“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

THE CURE

Interestingly, after having encountered the Pharisees and the Scribes, to whom Jesus gave no direct answer about the disciples' lack of handwashing, only a general disapproval of their approach to the Law; and then having given a general explanation to the crowd, and then the disciples, stating that it's not eating certain foods that makes a person unclean, but what comes out of the heart, Jesus is done speaking. The episode is concluded. It's as though He wants the point to sink in – there's **NOTHING** anyone can do to make themselves clean before God.

So is there a cure? Yes, the good news is that there is a cure. Jesus' point is that since unclean things don't come from outside ourselves, but from within the sinful human heart, we must look outside ourselves in order for our hearts to be clean. In other words, come to grips with the fact that even if we train ourselves to resist road rage, or learn to avoid the second look at a member of the opposite sex, or manage to count to ten when somebody irritates us, our hearts still won't be clean. We need to look **OUTSIDE** ourselves for our cleansing. Scripture invites us to look to a hill called Calvary, where Jesus died for sinners like you and me.

Luther finally found his comfort when he read **Romans 3:21-24** –

21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

In reading these words, Luther realized he could stop striving to provide his own cleansing and allow God to take His own righteousness, found in the sinless life and sacrificial death of Christ, and gift it to him by grace, through faith.

CONCLUSION

Ironically, after denouncing all the washings prescribed by the Pharisees and Scribes, Jesus, after His resurrection, instituted baptism, the sacrament that would do the very thing they had attempted to do, when he said in **Matthew 28:19-20** –

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Furthermore, it was Peter who said to the people who asked him ***“What shall we do?”*** following his Pentecost sermon in **Acts 2:38** –

He said, ***“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”***

Take comfort today in the fact that the only washing that matters is found in our baptism, the means by which, through water and the Word, the finished work of Christ, i.e., the blood of His cross and resurrection from the dead, is applied to our hearts and our sins are

forgiven. It comes from outside ourselves as a gift from God to truly forgive and cleanse us from the inside out when we receive it by faith.

Jesus would say to each one of us today –

“I am what you have been looking for! Instead of killing yourself through your own efforts to be clean, look to Me! My perfect life and innocent death and resurrection have provided a righteousness and a holiness for the whole world, including you. Believe in Me, remember what you received in your baptism – the purity of heart and the forgiveness of sins made possible for you through the blood of My cross. Be renewed each day in your freedom from sin and rest for your souls through repentance and faith. **A-men.**