

What Matters to God, What Doesn't

Mark 7:1–23

Turn to Mark 7 please. Jesus came into the world so that we and everyone could have a relationship with God. In 2 Corinthians we read, “*I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.*”

That's why Jesus came, that's what we want, that's why we are here this morning. God is our Father, and we are his sons and daughters. It is the best! Jesus came so that God could actually make us that offer, and we could take him up on it.

If God is our Father, and we are his sons and daughters, how should we act? Mark's Gospel has less teaching of Jesus than any of the other Gospels, but Jesus gave us a long teaching about right and wrong in Mark 7. When we think about sin, what matters to God, and what does not matter to God? God's people have always had a little trouble nailing that down, so we need to listen to Jesus on this.

Jesus teaches us here about being defiled. Our Scripture today uses the word “defiled” seven times. It means unclean, or contaminated. In the Bible, nothing defiled can be in God's presence. We have a holy God. The angels around him sing “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God Almighty.” Being defiled is the opposite of being holy.

Christ died for us, so that we could be washed and cleaned, we could come into God's presence. That's how we got to be his children. Still, though, we need to know what defiles us, and what does not. Jesus wanted to make sure that we understand what this.

1 The Disciples Disobey Tradition – Mark 7:1–5

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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.) 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?”

The Jews made rules to help them obey God's rules. For example, the fourth commandment says to not to work on the Sabbath, but to keep the Sabbath day holy. But what exactly was work? They made up rules to make sure they would keep the Sabbath.

Traveling was work, so they made up a distance how far you could walk on the Sabbath. About one kilometer. Any farther than that was work.

People had to eat on the Sabbath, so cooking was okay. But too much cooking was work, so they had rules about how much cooking was okay, and when it became work. Many, many Sabbath rules.

That's what their tradition was like, and they had *lots* of it, and they took it very seriously. Somewhere in there they had a rule that if you touched something unclean, and ate without washing, then you put that defilement into your body. It had nothing to do with ordinary dirt, or with being healthy. It was like putting sin into yourself. You were defiled before God. So, they had a rule that you should always wash your hands before you ate.

The disciples were not keeping this rule, and some Pharisees and scribes, the religious people, complained to Jesus. If Jesus was going to teach people about God, his disciples better obey the rules!

2 Pharisees Obey Human Tradition and Disobey God's Commands – Mark 7:6-8

Jesus 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. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."

Jesus gave those people an earful! I get the feeling that Jesus has been upset about their traditions for quite a while, but he had kept silent. But now that they brought it up, he was going after them.

Jesus quoted Isaiah to them. The last line is the most important: " You let the commands of God go, and hold on to human teachings." Isaiah didn't like this, God didn't like this, Jesus didn't like this: teaching the people human teachings instead of God's commands.

This will have been surprised everyone there, especially v8: "*you have let go of the commands of God and are holding to human traditions.*" They thought the human traditions *helped* them obey God. That's why they had these traditions. But Jesus said, no, they ended up disobeying God.

Jesus made a strong distinction between God's commands and human teachings, and he did not like human teachings. "Their hearts are far from me" (v6). Human teachings do not bring people's hearts close to God.

3 Jesus Gives the Pharisees and Scribes an Example – Mark 7:8-13

Jesus continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— then you no longer let them do anything for their father or

mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

If people in those days wanted to give something to God, they called it "corban," which means "gift," a gift to God. Suppose a man called something valuable "corban." That's fine, a good thing that he gives God something valuable.

Listen again to what Jesus said: *you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother.*

If the Pharisees heard someone say that, they *should* have said, "you may not say that, because God says honour father and your mother. You may not say that." What they said was "once the words were out of your mouth, you are bound."

That tradition was a human rule, to make sure people always kept their word. Now it is good to keep your word. But the tradition said, "You *cannot* change your mind." So, the man ended up giving the gift to God, and left his parents in need. He kept the *human* tradition, but he broke *God's* command to honour his parents. And Jesus added at the end of verse 13, "you do many things like this." (In Leviticus 5:4 God tells people how to get out of a hasty careless vow, though does not seem that this man made a vow.)

We think human teachings help us obey God, but they don't.

4 What Offends God Does Not Go Into Us, It Comes Out of Us – Mark 7:14-15

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

Now Jesus goes back to the original problem: the disciples not obeying the human teaching that they had to wash their hands before they ate. Jesus gave us a simple way to tell what defiles us in God's eyes: nothing going in to our body from the outside can defile us before God. What comes out of us from the inside is offensive to God and defiles us.

"What comes out defiles us" is not actually very clear, and I don't blame the disciples for not getting it. But nothing going in from the outside can defile us – that's pretty clear. The disciples didn't get it, and asked Jesus about it later.

5 What Goes Into Us from the Outside Does Not Enter Our Hearts – Mark 7:17-19

After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

Here Jesus explains the first half of verse 15 - nothing from the outside can defile us.

We need to talk about "heart" for a bit. We use "heart" to talk about our feelings. Someone sad has a "broken heart." Someone who feels sorry for others has a "soft heart." A cruel or mean person has a "hard heart," or has "no heart."

The Bible sometimes uses "heart" in that way. But the Bible also uses heart to mean that part of us that chooses to do right or to do wrong. Good and evil actions come out of heart choices. People *decide* in their hearts to do what is good or to do what is bad.

Nothing from outside can defile us before God, says Jesus, because it doesn't go into our *hearts*. Then Mark adds a short, important phrase. "Thus Jesus declared all foods clean."

Wow! Mark was written for Gentile believers. The apostle Peter ended up in Rome, and at the end of 1 Peter, Peter passes on greetings from "my son Mark." Peter and Mark in Rome had what Peter considered a father son relationship. Mark was written for Gentile believers in Rome. That Jesus said all foods were clean was good news for them.

Jesus declared all foods clean. By saying that nothing from the outside can defile a person, Jesus set aside a lot of what Moses commanded us. Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and he could do that. At the end of Matthew, Jesus said to the apostles, "Teach the nations to obey everything I commanded you." Everything *who* commanded us? Everything *Jesus* commanded us.

Jesus repeated many of Moses commands, and those we obey, because Jesus commanded them. If Moses commanded it, but Jesus did not, like the difference between clean and unclean food, then don't obey it. Obeying everything *Jesus* commanded gives us plenty to do! We don't need more rules.

It is still common for groups of believers to hold on to some part of the Old Testament that the New Testament never mentions. I always get the feeling that they believe this makes their obedience to God more complete. It does not. These rules distract us from what Jesus said. What Jesus commanded gives us plenty to do.

6 Real Defilement Comes Out of Our Hearts - Mark 7:20-23

He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. 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."

Here Jesus explains the second half of verse 15 - what comes out of us defiles us, because it comes out of our hearts. We don't think of Jesus as preaching much against sin. We like it when he calls the Pharisees hypocrites, as he did a few sentences back. But here Jesus preaches against sin, and he has a long list ready.

He was prepared to go after the traditions of the Pharisees, he was also prepared to describe real sin. One of my commentaries said that Jesus went after this with gusto. With energy. He lists twelve sins, and we'll take a brief look at each.

The list begins with evil thoughts, evil reasonings. This is an umbrella for the rest, not one of the twelve. We should understand evil plans, evil purposes, from our hearts.

Sexual immorality: Paul has a couple of lists that read much like this list of Jesus (1 Cor 6; Gal 5). Paul's lists also begin with sexual immorality. Jesus will have in mind the way Moses described sexual immorality in Leviticus 18. Any sexual activity that's not between a married man and woman.

Theft: This is one of the ten commandments. God gives everyone the right to own property, and we will leave alone what is not ours.

Murder: You shall not kill is another of the ten commandments. We don't have a right to their property, and we don't have a right to their life.

Adultery: You shall not commit adultery is another of the ten commandments. We shall honour our own marriage, and we shall honour our neighbour's marriage as well.

Greed: This is pretty close to the last commandment, you shall not covet. So common.

Malice: This is when I am determined to hurt someone, go after them, to be hostile. I want to attack them. But, people, not if we follow Jesus.

Deceit: This is close to "you shall not bear false witness." Tell the truth. Live honestly.

Lewdness: This gets translated different ways. It means "no boundaries in seeking pleasure" or "unrestrained sensuality." There's enough of that around, and sometimes it calls us, doesn't it.

Envy: This is similar to greed. Someone else has it, and I don't have it, and I really want that. I wish I had that. This is on the same list as murder and adultery.

Slander: Who of us can escape this one? Saying bad things about other people. Comes far too easily to us. It is in the same list, people, as sexual immorality and murder.

Arrogance: Too high an opinion of ourselves. Opposite of humility. An arrogant person thinks, "Well, I am actually better than others. How can I pretend I don't know that. I just am!" Watch out, people.

Folly, Foolishness: This is the last one, and is a kind of summary. In the Bible, foolish does not mean lacking intelligence. It means ignoring God in daily life. Respecting God is the beginning of wisdom. The foolish builder, says Jesus, hears my words but does not do them. A fool is someone who does not care about the sins on this list.

That's the list. Let's go back to our hearts. Things that come into us from the outside don't defile us, says Jesus, because they don't go into our hearts. But the sins Jesus just listed, he says, come out of our hearts.

I don't like this. I want to say, "yes, I struggle with some sins, but in my heart I just want to serve God and please him." "Not a chance," says Jesus. "That defilement in your life comes from your heart."

You and I cannot say, "yes, we sin, but in our hearts we are pure after God." Jesus won't let us say that. Things come out of our hearts that attack our relationship with our Father. Good things do come out of our hearts, that's true. But so do the wrong things.

This chapter is a kindness from the Lord. He tells us again today what matters to God, and what doesn't. This list is clear. These things defile us. They attack our relationship with our Father.

After a similar list, Paul writes: "*No such person has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on the disobedient.*" Ephesians 5. Defilement matters.

God promises to forgive our sins. If we ask, God will compassionately forgive and cleanse us. The Lord's prayer is for people like us. "Father, forgive us our sins." But it is Lord's kindness to teach us about sin. He spells out for us what offends our Father, and what doesn't. Let's take all this to heart, and steer our lives in our Father's ways. Amen.

PRAYER: Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners. Give your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise, so that our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are to be found. Help us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.

Appendix: What human tradition now gets treated like God's command?

Here's one: daily private Bible reading is essential for spiritual health. I read the Bible every day, and have for ages, so I can talk. If you read the Bible, you find out that the Bible never says to read the Bible every day. Until the printing press 500 years ago, no one had their own Bible. Daily reading was impossible. Daily private Bible reading is essential for spiritual health: that's a human tradition, not a divine command, and it is not true. It has helped some people, and discouraged many others, because they tried and it didn't work. It was a hard battle, and they lost. Some believers meet God regularly in private Bible reading, and many do not. It is that simple. It is a human tradition.