
What is True Defilement?

Mark 7:1-23

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Introduction

One of things that stands out to me in the book of Mark is the stark difference between the neediness of the massive crowds and the rejection of those closest to Jesus including his friends and family in his home town of Nazareth. The masses are constantly following Jesus demanding teaching and healing (Mark writes, “like sheep without a shepherd”), and it is the Gentiles in Mark that often demonstrate the most faith. The religious leaders of the day are also following Jesus, listening, plotting, and trying to trap him to ultimately have him killed. Jesus’ own disciples don’t really understand who he is, and they regularly struggle to demonstrate the faith necessary to fully believe in Jesus as servant and king.

Our story picks up in verse 53 of chapter 6. *After they had crossed the lake, they landed at Gennesaret. They brought the boat to shore and climbed out. The people recognized Jesus at once, and they ran throughout the whole area, carrying sick people on mats to wherever they heard he was. Wherever he went—in villages, cities, or the countryside—they brought the sick out to the marketplaces. They begged him to let the sick touch at least the fringe of his robe, and all who touched him were healed.*

The Pharisee’s Question Jesus (Mark 7:1-5)

One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. ² They noticed that some of his disciples failed to follow the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating. ³ (The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions. ⁴ Similarly, they don’t eat anything from the market until they immerse their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions they have clung to—such as their ceremonial washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles). ⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, “Why don’t your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony.”

As soon as Jesus began his teaching ministry you see the “ultimate religious group”, (the Pharisee's) following Jesus questioning his teaching, miracles and even the authority by which he taught. At least the masses who follow Jesus realize they are needy, and Jesus has compassion for the people and their needs. The Pharisee’s, on the other hand were supposed to meet the spiritual needs of the people but had put themselves above the very people they are supposed to help. The Pharisee’s were supposed to teach and shepherd the Jewish people to obey the scripture, but over time they had added hundreds of rules and regulations to scripture they supposed to uphold. Jesus is constantly battling the Pharisees throughout the Gospels; the Pharisees hated Jesus because he ignored their rules and traditions, and Jesus condemned their arrogance, hypocrisy and self-righteousness.

The Tradition of Handwashing

Handwashing and foot washing was part of the Old Testament Law for Tabernacle priests as they prepared for their various offerings and sacrifices that God expected. Priests had an elaborate system of washing and purifying rituals that God required for the Priests and the people in order to be ceremonially clean. They had to wash hands, feet, and bath, wash clothes and purify sacrifices all according to God's instructions in His word. Of course, true purity and cleanliness would have been impossible (in God's eyes), and yet God still accepted the sacrifices of the priests if they followed the Law as He commanded. God demanded purity and used the sacrificial system to teach his people (and all readers of scripture), that God would ultimately demand the perfect sacrifice of His only son to atone for the sins of many once and for all.

It seems that there are actually two types of handwashing's in question here. If you look at the text, first in verse two. ² *They noticed that some of his disciples failed to follow the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating.* ³ *(The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions.* The Pharisees had as many as 8 different handwashing rituals. The most common was the tradition of pouring water over cupped hands three times before a meal. Typically, this is followed by a blessing. This ritual required a minimum measure of water equal to one and half medium-sized eggs. The water in the vessel must be enough to cover the middle joint of the fingers, and there was an extra blessing if using excess water.

Law or Tradition?

The second type of handwashing is referenced in verse four and reads, ⁴ *Similarly, they don't eat anything from the market until they immerse their hands in water.* This is likely to have been a less formal handwashing ceremony, possibly using some type of running water from a water source if available. The Pharisees believed if they even touched the garment of a common person or a Gentile in the marketplace they would be unclean or defiled until they performed a handwashing ceremony. The ritual of handwashing was practiced with such rigidity that willfully neglecting its practice could be grounds for excommunication.

Jesus knew the rules of the Pharisees. He grew up in the synagogue with the teachers and priests, and he knew that the hand washing rituals were not necessary for him or his disciples to follow because they were simply man-made traditions. You can even see in the text Mark's emphasis on the ritualistic element of the handwashing. Look at the words Mark uses to describe handwashing. ...Jewish ritual, ancient traditions, many traditions they have clung to, our age-old traditions, ceremonial washing.... Handwashing to this extent was never required by Old Testament Law. The Pharisees could not see that outward obedience to the Law did not necessarily equate to inward worship. The Pharisees idolized their outward obedience to their rules and traditions, and ignored the need for inward repentance of sin.

Jesus Responds (Mark 7:6-8)

⁶ *Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*

⁷ *Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.* ⁸ *For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition."*

Hard and Distant Hearts (Isaiah 29:13-16)

Isaiah 29:10-21 (NLT). This is what Isaiah writes;

¹³ *And so the Lord says, "These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.*

¹⁴ *Because of this, I will once again astound these hypocrites with amazing wonders. The wisdom of the wise will pass away, and the intelligence of the intelligent will disappear."*

¹⁵ *What sorrow awaits those who try to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their evil deeds in the dark! "The LORD can't see us," they say. "He doesn't know what's going on!"*

¹⁶ *How foolish can you be? He is the Potter, and he is certainly greater than you, the clay! Should the created thing say of the one who made it, "He didn't make me"? Does a jar ever say, "The potter who made me is stupid"?*

From the very beginning of their relationship with God, the Israelites are described as a stubborn and stiff-necked people. God rescued the children of Israel from slavery and bondage, only to have them reject God and his plan for them throughout their history. God closed the eyes of Israel for the most part as he revealed his plan of salvation through the coming of Christ. All too often the Jewish people in history simply turned to other gods and their own man-made traditions that the Pharisees continued and idolized. Now Christ is present and the religious leaders of the day (the very ones that should have recognized the Messiah when he came), are rejecting him because he and his followers will not obey the Pharisaical traditions. The Pharisees think they are being spiritual but in fact they are being hard-hearted. Their hard-heartedness is shown through their outward obedience to external regulations, while intentionally ignoring clear obligations found in scripture. Ironically, scripture is being fulfilled in front of them and they can't even see it because of the blindness of their hearts and their love for their rules, laws and traditions.

Corban (Mark 7:9-13)

⁹ *Then he said, "You skillfully sidestep God's law in order to hold on to your own tradition. ¹⁰ For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.'* ¹¹ *But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, 'Sorry, I can't help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.'* ¹² *In this way, you let them disregard their needy parents. ¹³ And so you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition. And this is only one example among many others."*

The Pharisees created was a law that allowed the people to claim "Corban" (which literally means, a gift or offering consecrated to God). This allowed one to set that gift aside for their own selfish purposes and essentially break one of the commands of God's word. Jesus' uses a

common occurrence of Corban to explain. As parents grew older, adult children were to take care of their aging parents which obviously cost money. Jews were allowed to claim Corban with the money that might be allocated for taking care of aging parents and by-pass the commandment, "honor your father and mother". That money was technically dedicated to God (through the Pharisee's created loophole), and didn't have to be used on aging parents but could be selfishly used by the adult child instead. Ideally, the money that was committed to God would eventually become the property of the Temple, but only inasmuch as there was anything left after the death of the owner. So Corban was actually a law created by the Pharisee's in order to keep from actually obeying God's true Law.

True Defilement (Mark 7:14-15)

¹⁴ Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. "All of you listen," he said, "and try to understand. ¹⁵ It's not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart."

Jesus leaves the crowd and the Pharisees with this last thought. Most people didn't comprehend what Jesus was explaining, including his disciples. We saw in the Isaiah passage that the people's eyes are blinded because the gospel message was not fully revealed yet. But he is still calling for the listener to listen and discern what he is saying. The Jews would have known the importance of being cleansed of their sin, and cleansed of anything that might have caused one to be unclean in God's eyes. But cleanliness was seen as merely an external exercise, and Jesus is trying to get them to see that sin comes from inside their hearts not outside the body. Believing and understanding required new eyes, and a new faith.

The Truth about Food Regulations (Mark 7:17-19)

One of the important aspects of purity in the Old Covenant was food regulations. Leviticus 11 laid out how the people of Israel would know whether a certain food source was clean or unclean and which animals could be eaten or not eaten. So this idea of what goes into a man does not make a person unclean would have caused some confusion. The Israelites tended to see the world through external regulation, even though from the very beginning God called for a people set apart and holy, a people that worshipped God genuinely from the heart, but the reality was purity was seen as having effect from the outside in.

¹⁷ Then Jesus went into a house to get away from the crowd, and his disciples asked him what he meant by the parable he had just used. ¹⁸ "Don't you understand either?" he asked.

Jesus expressed frustration with the disciple's lack of faith and understanding of who he is and what he is trying to teach them. This is a reoccurring theme in Mark. In chapter 4:33, *Mark tells us that he only spoke in parables in public but he always explained the parables to his disciples.* They didn't understand the parable of the sower and the explanation of the heart as the soil of receiving God's word. Jesus rebuked the disciples for not having faith when Jesus had to quiet the storm in the middle of the lake and they looked for a purely physical solution to feeding the 5,000, and again with feeding 4,000 later in the book. Now they don't understand what Jesus means by true impurity coming from the inside of a person, and Jesus openly expresses his frustration with them.

In verse 18 Jesus says, *“Can’t you see that the food you put into your body cannot defile you?¹⁹ Food doesn’t go into your heart, but only passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer.”* (By saying this, he declared that every kind of food is acceptable in God’s eyes.)

Just the idea of all food being clean would have turned all that the disciples believed about food purification laws on its head! (And we know from the book of Acts that Peter didn’t fully understand this idea until he was confronted by Paul much later). Now Jesus explains that there really are no clean and unclean foods, that all foods are clean in God’s sight. He is trying to get the disciples to see that He is greater than the Old Covenant and challenging them as to the true meaning of scripture, and that true belief takes place in the heart and not by following traditions and man-made rules.

Sin Comes from Within (Mark 7:20-23)

²⁰And then he added, “It is what comes from inside that defiles you. ²¹For from within, out of a person’s heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²²adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. ²³All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you.”

Here is what The New Bible Commentary has to say about this passage: *“They (the disciples), like most Jews of their time, thought of sin as a sort of germ, an infection caught by contact with others outside. Jesus taught that sin was like a cancer, growing within us, Jew and non-Jew alike. That is far harder to deal with, for we cannot avoid it by avoiding ‘infection’ from others; it needs radical spiritual surgery that will change our inner nature.”*

Carson, D. A., France, R. T., Motyer, J. A., & Wenham, G. J. (Eds.). (1994). New Bible commentary: 21st century edition (4th ed., p. 962). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

But don’t we usually treat our sin the same way? Don’t we often ignore the sinful thoughts that are inside us and work hard to live out a righteousness on the outside so people think that we are “good”? Are you a different person at church than you are at work? Do you change the person you are because of others expectations? Do you act righteously among those who expect it, and differently when we are away from church or with unbelievers? If we are living varied and separate lives at church, home, work, and with friends, then we are no different from the Pharisee’s in their hypocrisy or the disciples in their unbelief.

The Sinful Heart

James 1 reminds us that temptation can be external, but external temptation feeds our internal heart desires. Pride, deceit, evil thoughts, wickedness – Sinful thoughts and actions often stem from pride. Because of pride and wickedness, we can think highly of ourselves and we may constantly judge others and compare ourselves to others. We can be selfish and want what we want, and we convince ourselves in our minds that we deserve to be comforted, that we deserve to be in control of everything around us, perhaps causing us to deceive and manipulate others to get what we want. And we are all highly skilled at hiding our sinful desires and motives from ourselves and others to feed those strong heart desires.

Sexual immorality, lustful desires, adultery – Jesus tells us that if you look on a woman to lust after her you have already committed adultery with her in your heart. We don't actually have to physically have sex with another person to commit sexual immorality, or adultery, but we can have lustful desires which is still the same sin in God's eyes.

Greed, envy, theft – Isn't greed and envy the same sin as stealing? We want what someone else has, and we judge others for having things we want or believe we deserve. We are often unwilling to give to others out of our own "stuff" because we are too attached to our worldly possessions, and our hearts are tied to what we have and want on this earth.

Slander, murder - In the book of James, James describes arguing and anger towards another person as murder, because in our hearts, it is no different than actually committing the act of murder itself in God's eyes. And slander is the verbal assault of another person with the intent of harm.

Even foolishness originates in the heart and is sinful in God's eyes.

Jesus is slowly and radically dismantling the disciples' view of what true worship and righteousness is, while showing them that they are unable to keep the Law on their own strength. If there is no self-cure for the sin in our hearts, there can only be one hope, a savior. A savior who heals not from the outside in, but from the inside out. Jesus is telling his disciples that the Pharisee's argument isn't even the right question, because outward actions alone cannot make one righteous in God's eyes, nor do good deeds or following religious traditions show what is truly residing inside the heart.

Like the Pharisees we tend to look outside our hearts for the cause of our sin. We might even follow religious traditions or our own man-made regulations to judge our spiritual maturity or even that of someone else. It's easier to follow a set of rules than to live by faith and grace.

Jesus is Our Only Hope

We sin when we feed the sinful desires that are present in our hearts. That is why James says that we are lured into committing sin, because it already resides in our heart. If we feed and give into those sinful thoughts and desires, we will eventually sin, which can lead to painful consequences and even eternal death. So, we can be like the Pharisee's who lived by external rules and regulations that they believed determined their righteousness, and we can also be like the disciples who lacked the faith and the fortitude to look inward to confront their own sin of unbelief. We cannot be cleansed by trying to be pure on the outside. We cannot keep the Law, nor can we cease sinning on our own strength. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot wash our hands of impurity like the Pharisees. We can only be saved by Christ, who shed His blood and paid the full price for our sin-past, present and future.

Conclusion

Do you honor the Lord with your words but your heart is far away from God?

Believing that traditions, rules and legalism are pleasing to God and are in-fact, evidence of unbelief.

We are made impure by the sin in our heart, not directly from the world around us.

The problem is not the world. The problem is you and me. The problem is our hearts. Sin is not a germ that can be transmitted to us from others or the world. Sin is a cancer that grows from within our heart.

Our only hope is to believe and bow to Jesus as the One who transforms our hearts and ultimately changes our behavior.



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