

Clean From the Inside Out -- Mark 6:53-7:23

by Travis Dean
February 5, 2011

Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

Lord, we are about to open Your Word. It is living and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword. May its life bring us a resurrection experience today. May its power move our hearts and change us. May its ability to cut reveal what's in our hearts, and put within us a great desire to be like You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Our story today is heavily colored by the Jewish culture. Unless we are able to understand this way of life, we won't be able to appreciate the story. Among the Jews there was a practice of ceremonial washing. It will be hard for us to grasp just how significant this was in the Jewish culture, but I would like to give us at least a little idea. This practice is mentioned in Mark 7:3. (Read) The New King James version describes how they washed their hands as "in a special way". A more literal translation would be "to the wrist" or "with a fist-full of water". According to the Jewish elders there was a certain, proper way to wash your hands. The water was poured on the fingers and palms and allowed to run off at the wrists without flowing back into the palm. The amount of water used had to be at least 1½ egg shells-full of water.

To understand how important this ceremonial washing was in the Jewish culture, I would like us to consider what was written by Ellen White in the book Desire of Ages p. 395. First of all this ritual was strenuously enforced. It was not an option. And the Jewish elders were stricter than the highway patrol are today about the speed limit. Second, it was a heinous sin to not participate. You were labeled and put on the most-wanted list. It was taught that in the life to come you would be severely punished. Third, the rules for washing were numberless. It was almost impossible to keep track of them all. A lifetime seemed insufficient to figure out all the requirements. And fourth, this ceremonial washing made life into one long struggle against ceremonial defilement. You spent your whole life trying to stay pure, trying not to get defiled. These rituals were a great burden to the Jewish people. No one ever felt good enough for God.

This is what Jesus was questioned about in our story today. And this is what He spoke out against. Let's begin with a summary of the story:

After the Passover the Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem. They questioned why His disciples did not wash their hands according to the tradition of the elders. Jesus accused them of placing their traditions above God's law. He also clarified to the crowds that what defiles someone is not what goes into the stomach, but the wickedness that comes from the heart.

Let's now consider what Jesus experienced in this story. You're welcome to follow along in your Bibles. I will not be putting all the texts on the screen. The page number for the pew Bibles is 889. We will be looking at Mark 6:53-7:23. First of all, Jesus experienced healing the sick. This is mentioned in Mark 6:53-56, which is a transitional narrative. It describes what took place between the story about Jesus walking on the water (which we covered in our sermon last week, "Walking on Water") and today's story. Our last story took place a short time before the Passover festival. The Jews all gathered in Jerusalem for this great feast. However, according to John 7:1, Jesus did not go to Jerusalem. He stayed in Galilee to avoid the Jews who were plotting for His life and the end of His ministry. So, while everyone else was celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem, Jesus was going around healing people who were sick in Galilee.

Second, Jesus experienced being accused. Mark 7:1 says that the Pharisees and some of the scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem. It seems that after the Passover was completed, the Jewish leaders directed their attention to Jesus. They noticed that Jesus hadn't come to Jerusalem. So they decided to go to Him. There was a delegation sent to try to bring Jesus' popularity and ministry to an end. Verse 2 of Mark chapter 7 says that when this delegation arrived they found some of Jesus' disciples doing something "wrong". They seem to be experts in finding people doing something wrong and falling short of their prescribed way of living. They approached Jesus about some of His disciples, but they probably knew that Jesus was guilty of the same thing. In fact, in Luke 11:37, 38 it mentions that when Jesus went to a Pharisee's house for dinner, that the

Pharisee couldn't believe that Jesus didn't wash His hands before He ate. And remember, the purpose for this particular type of washing was not to get the dirt off. It was to make yourself pure in God's sight.

According to verse 14 of Mark chapter 7, Jesus had been teaching the crowds when these Jewish leaders arrived. After Jesus answered the Pharisees, verse 14 mentions that Jesus called the multitude back together to continue teaching them. So, when this group from Jerusalem pushed their way in, they were interrupting. They were distracting the people from Jesus' teaching. He was sharing with them how to be saved and what is really important in God's eyes. But these Jewish leaders butted in and turned the conversation to this ceremonial washing. Verse 5 of Mark chapter 7 records their question - "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders?" Their primary concern is not about what God says. It's about their own traditions.

Third, Jesus experienced exposing hypocrisy. In Mark 7:6 Jesus calls these Jewish leaders "hypocrites". This word means to pretend. Jesus saw through these men. What appeared to be holiness was really hypocrisy. Jesus' pronouncement against the Pharisees is repeated four times. The first time is in verse 7, where Jesus is actually quoting from the prophet Isaiah. (Read) Jesus declared that they were failing at worship while they were experts in the commandments of men. The next exposing statement by Jesus is in verse 8. (Read) These experts in the law of God were actually "laying aside" (or "letting go") the commandment of God, while holding on to the tradition of men. The third statement of Jesus exposing their hypocrisy is in verse 9. (Read) Jesus here repeated the fact that they were disregarding the commandment of GOD, so that they could "keep" ("observe" or "guard") their own tradition. Their zeal for their own traditions had been at the expense of the commandment of God. Jesus' fourth statement is found in verse 13. (Read) Jesus accused them of taking away the authority of the word of God by exalting their own traditions. Here, in fact, they are putting themselves above God.

Jesus, though, didn't just accuse the Jewish leaders of hypocrisy. He gave an example to drive home His point. In verse 11 of Mark chapter 7 we find the word "Corban". Even today this is a very important word to the Jews. In Hebrew it is spelled with a 'k' - "Korban". This word is translated "offering" in the Old Testament. Jesus used a scenario involving a son and his parents. According to the laws of the priests in Jesus' day, a man could take something that belonged to him and dedicate it to the Lord as a "korban" (offering). However as long as this man was alive, he was free to make use of it. But when he died it then belonged to those in charge of the temple. Today, this would be like a living trust. You can set up a trust today, so that when you die, everything goes to a particular organization. The bad part about this situation in Jesus' day was that it gave opportunity for dishonoring your parents. If someone didn't like their parents, they could give everything they had to "God" as an offering. And the Jewish leaders said they were thus released from any responsibility to their parents. In an effort to enrich their own pockets, these religious leaders were encouraging people to break one of the Ten Commandments - the fifth one in particular, which states, "Honor your father and your mother".

Last of all, in our story Jesus experienced revealing the source of impurity. After He had silenced the delegation from Jerusalem, He turned back to the crowd. He explained to them the true source of defilement, and then later repeated the idea to His disciples, who later question Him about it. Notice what Jesus says in verses 18 and 19 of Mark chapter 7. He is here speaking to the disciples. (Read) Jesus got real vivid in His explanation. He gave a short lesson in the digestive and excretory systems of the human body. What you eat comes into your body from the outside. It travels down into your stomach. Then it works its way out until it finally "is eliminated". The wording used here actually pictures the remains going out into the toilet. Jesus' point is that it doesn't enter the heart. And He's not referring here to the organ of the heart, but the emotions and the inside of a person's mind. According to 1 Samuel 16:7 that is what God looks at.

Verse 19 of Mark chapter 7 ends with the phrase, "purifying all foods". According to the sentence structure in the Greek this is a parenthetical expression. It is not part of what Jesus said, but rather a comment from the author, Mark. Many Christians today interpret this verse to mean they can eat anything that moves. But such an interpretation ignores the context of this expression. The issue brought up by the Pharisees was not what types of food can be eaten. Rather the issue was what someone had to do before they ate. Jesus' main

concern was the heart, not the stomach. He was not making here a supernatural declaration that everything now is healthy and good for food. Neither was He re-writing the Law of Moses, which distinguishes clean meat from unclean meat. Jesus is saying that how you wash your hands before you eat does not affect how holy you are. There is no such thing as righteousness by eating food with clean hands. "Purifying all foods" means no food can make you impure or defiled in God's eyes.

Now Jesus turned from His lesson of the digestive system to what is really critical regarding being pure. Notice what He said in Mark 7:20-23. (Read) It's what's in here (the heart) that really matters. We aren't morally defiled and made unholy by what goes into our stomach. The problem is what's in our hearts. Jesus gave a list of the wicked things that we think, feel, and do in verses 21, 22. And He stated that all of this bad stuff comes out of a bad heart. While the Jewish leaders were experts in how to perform these ceremonial washings, they were filthy on the inside. Their hearts were filled with hatred and thoughts of murder. They kept everyone focused on their actions instead of revealing their need for a new heart. Jesus was saying, "You've got it all wrong. It doesn't matter how clean your hands are before you eat, if your heart is filled with jealousy and envy."

A couple years ago our family purchased this minivan. It had some nice things going for it. The bodywork was in excellent condition and the engine looked like new. Not only that, but the price was right. With a trade-in, we were able to pay cash for it. Not too long after we drove it home, we began to experience some problems under the hood. We noticed some transmission fluid leaking onto the floor of the garage. Over the next several weeks we ended up having the transmission rebuilt. Through the following months we continued to put money into it for one reason or another. Then it began to brake down along the road. This happened a couple times and finally we came to the conclusion that this cycle might never end. And that wasn't all. We had run out of money. I remember standing with my children as we watched the tow truck haul the van off to the junk yard. It was a difficult decision. The van looked so nice on the outside. Even though we had only owned it for a relatively short time, it seemed that I was losing part of myself.

As sinners we are a little bit like this minivan. It doesn't matter how nice we might look on the outside. Our hearts are unfixable. Even God can't fix them. The only solution is to get a new heart. In closing I invite you to turn with me to Ezekiel 36:26. (Read) God makes us a deal. He offers to replace all the bad parts.

Maybe you've never taken God up on His offer. Today is the day. There's no reason for anyone to leave without a new heart. If you were to stand before a holy God, you might feel banged up and downright filthy. But God has a new heart for you. And it's completely free. Allow Him to make you completely new today.

Father,

You have diagnosed us and have found our hearts are irreparable. We have no hope on our own. We will never be pure. We will never be holy unless You intervene. I praise you that in Jesus Christ You have already intervened. You have provided a new heart, the pure heart of Jesus Himself. Today I accept this priceless gift and rejoice that if I were to stand before You today in the courts of heaven, I would be without spot. Thank you for Jesus, the perfect solution to our defilement, a perfect Savior. In His name we pray, amen.