



"The Heart of The Matter"
Rev. Dr. Scott Field
Mark 7: 1 - 23
September 2, 2018
9:15 AM Service

This Sunday we return to our regularly scheduled focus in Scripture, which is the Gospel of Mark. We took a little detour into areas of dealing with difficult relationships during the month of August, but now we are back on the road engaging the record of Jesus' life, teaching, and ministry directly. And here's a doozy in Mark 7. It has to do with the danger of religious charade and the importance of personal integrity.

We are all aware of recent examples of this:

Among the unsettling events in the church world over the past several months has been the uproar among our friends at Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington. News of allegations of sexual misconduct against the founding pastor, discouragement at the defensiveness and cursory rush to institutional self-preservation, the stepping down of Bill Hybels earlier than planned, and, most recently, the resignation of both current co-pastors as well as the Board of Elders has abounded. Dr. Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary in Lisle and formerly a participant in the life of Willow Creek Church for more than a decade, wrote about the impact of the recent events there. While McKnight admits that he doesn't know everything he goes on to say,

"What I do know is this: Bill Hybels and Willow Creek's leadership have undone forty years of trust for many."

(His blog post on this matter is insightful and worth the time to read. You can find it at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/27/about-willow-creek-what-do-i-think/>)

These events have led to the shared anxiety of many 'Creekers' as to whether they've been participating in a fraud all along. Things have not been as they have appeared to be.

Here's another:

The scathing report by a Pennsylvania Grand Jury recently reports the widespread child sexual abuse by Roman Catholic priests over a period of seventy years, adding another chapter to the sordid and heart-breaking accounts of children who were supposed to be in the most sacred of places and relationships but were victimized by the leaders sworn to their protection and well-being.

(One source of reporting on this: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/us/catholic-church-sex-abuse-pennsylvania.html>).

A friend of ours, a Roman Catholic priest, now retired, says it used to be that when he wore his clerical collar and was in the grocery store, he was greeted by mom's and their children. Now the moms hold their children close and scurry away when they see the priest.

This is not to point fingers at our sisters and brothers within the Willow Creek or Roman Catholic communities. Our own United Methodist Church denomination is embroiled in a highly-charged conflict over our standards related to sexual ethics, marriage and ordination of clergy. I won't take time at the moment to detail all of that, but it will be the focus of our Open Forum sessions coming up on November 10 and 11.

These instances, and so many, many more, make it understandable why increasing numbers of people choose to leave organized religion behind. I fully and completely understand. But leaving it behind doesn't actually address the underlying reality. Proclaiming ourselves to be spiritual but not religious is, to my view, a self-deceiving fraud.

Let's turn to the encounter between the Jesus and the teachers of the religious law. It starts out about appropriate hand-washing techniques, but goes to the heart of the matter concerning religious behavior and honest-to-God integrity.

Pay attention to the Word of the Lord:

"One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. They noticed that some of his disciples failed to follow the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating. (The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions. 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.) 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." 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. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.' For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition."

Mark 7:1-8 NLT

Already in the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus has had some run-ins with the teachers of the religious rules and regulations. These have had to do with who you can eat with (Mk 2:15-17), when and how to practice the spiritual discipline of fasting (Mk 2:18-22), and on proper ways to observe the Sabbath (Mk 2:23-28). In this passage the issue is ritual washing and dietary regulations.

For their part, to be fair, the Pharisees and keepers of the religious laws, were convinced that the strict discipline of human conduct, including how you and when you wash your hand -- whether with cupped hands, immersed up to the finger joints, or immersed up to the wrist -- all conduct in public and private

was determined because behaving rightly, in their view, was the necessary prelude to authentically honoring God as Lord over all. We might see a connection here with behavioral cognitive therapy in which beginning to act differently helps us to think differently. Most of us call this "fake it 'til you make it". In our own tradition we find that this was the counsel given to John Wesley. Though ordained in the Church of England he was not convinced that God saves us by grace but that we needed to behave rightly in order for God to save us. Salvation was sort of a cooperative venture: If I'm good enough, God will save me. By the grace of God, Wesley was counseled by a Peter Bohler, a Moravian, who told him, "Preach faith alone until you have it yourself; and then because you have it you will preach faith alone." (See Wesley's Journal for March of 1738).

The Gospel account goes on where we can see that Mark, the author, is almost rolling his eye with a dismissive remark that the ceremonial religious law not only had rules for the various proper ways to wash hands, but also for washing cups, pots, and copper vessels.

This matter of questioning Jesus about his disciples not washing their hands the proper way was, of course, just the tip of the iceberg. The inferred allegation was that Jesus disregarded the whole structure of the religious traditions. How come he didn't promote and enforce the rules and the regulations of Jewish religion?

He calls them out as hypocrites. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, he remarks that they honor the lord with their words (and, presumably, their hand washing), but their hearts are far from the Lord. They are more concerned with their man-made traditions than with the commands of God.

After giving an example of placing religious tradition over the commands of God (Mark 7:9-13), Jesus takes on the dietary regulations about foods that are holy and those that are not as if what we consume confers holiness or corruption simply by our eating it. Not so.

Holiness, that is, the devotion of a person to God, to God's ways, to God's Word, and to God's purposes, is not a matter of what we put into our body but of what comes from our heart.

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

Mark 7:20-23 NLT

Contrary to some opinions, the devil doesn't make us do these things. These come from within us. God's Word, through Jeremiah the prophet says, that our hearts are desperately corrupt and beyond understanding. David, in the Psalms, prays for God to create a clean heart within him because he is quite aware of his mixed motives and deceptive ways. Jesus, we find in John's gospel, refused to trust himself to the people because he knew they, finally, could not be trusted.

You see, much of the human enterprise is based on our calculated efforts to hide the truth about ourselves from others. It seems to me that one of the least attractive characteristics of human beings is that we are frauds. Marketing, in many cases, is based on fake needs for unnecessary products. Fashion and lifestyle choices are often connected to impression management - presenting the "me" I want others to see and believe that I really am.

Social media allows me to select both my audience and what I reveal about myself. We are experts at impression management.

The irony of religious rules and regulations is that they can become a wall which allows me to hide behind my religious practices and habits so I don't actually have to encounter God's Word of judgement and redemption for me personally.

Clement of Alexandria, writing in the 2nd Century about this passage of Scripture, observed,
"God sees straight through our evasions to our deepest inward intentions."
(Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, InterVarsity, 1998, *loc.cit*, p. 97)

We can attempt to set this matter aside as something for mega churches, or priests in Pennsylvania, or denominational leaders, but it is as close as each one of us today. Jesus was talking to ordinary folks in Mark 7. The heart of the matter, as it turns out, is a matter of the heart. The word "salvation" actually means "wholeness". One aspect of that is simply the integrity that who we present ourselves to be is the real person whom we are, by God's grace.

The public examples of believers who have gone off the rails can be fodder for our tsk-tsking, gossiping, and dismissal of Christianity all together. But taking that path can also be a dodge on our part. Those examples are better, I think, a sober caution to us about the tangled nature of our own self-deception. God sees through our evasions, too.

So how might we move beyond "going to church" and experience a growing inner integrity, an actual loving of God with heart, soul, mind, and strength? How can we become the kind of people, as one person said, "our dogs think we are"?

There are four spiritual practices that I think help us toward a healthy heart:

Confession: having the courage to come before God as we really are. Not first with a list of our wants, as if God is a vending machine to pop out blessings we demand, but more like coming to God as a physician and telling the Lord how we really are. If you are blessed with a soul friend, this confession can be shared with him or her as well. Saying it out loud takes away the fear and opens the way for both forgiveness and healing.

Engaging Scripture: I often compare the Bible to an MRI. The Word of God has a way of revealing the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. There are a lot of false demands and expectations placed upon each of us from so many sources. This was part of Jesus' critique of the religious rules and regulations: they substitute heavy obligations of religious performance and moral perfection when God's way is filled with joy and peace.

Prayer: The simple and profound prayer is the prayer Jesus offered in the Garden of Gethsemane. All prayers grow from this type of praying: "Not my way, but your way, O God."

And holy community: This, I believe, is behind the tragedy that currently challenges our sisters and brothers at Willow Creek. When any of us move beyond the reach of accountable community or when the community no longer holds us accountable to God's Word and God's ways, then we are in a hall of mirrors where our own reflection is all we can see. And we always like to see our own reflection, don't we? This is why small groups that retain the practice of watching over one another in love are so valuable. Or a trusted Christian friend who knows us and can help keep us grounded.

Today, no matter where we are at on the integrity scale, God welcomes us to the table of grace and forgiveness. We are invited to look around at the community of which we are part and live in love and compassion toward one another. And, during a turning point time of the year, this is an opportunity to consider how we might place ourselves in the context of honest confession, prayerful self-reflection, and authentic Christian community so that our daily living will grow from pure hearts. Take a step today to move out of the shadows and into the Godlight.