**Dirty hearts in need of a wash**

Text: Mark 7:1-23

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 10:12-16; Exodus 30:17-21; Mark 6:53-7:23

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 211, 51b, 445, 139, 525

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#19)

**Theme:** The Pharisees and scribes found fault with Jesus because His disciples did not follow their scribal tradition and in response Jesus exposes their rejection of God’s Law as they adhere to their own rules, also revealing that it is the heart that needs cleansing, not the outside of a person.

**Proposition:** Our hearts are in need of renewal and cleansing.

**Introduction**

‘*Have you washed your hands?*’ I remember that question being asked by my parents before most mealtimes when I was a boy at home. It always seemed a little strange to me, because (in olde English style) we ate almost everything at dinnertime, including takeaway fish and chips, with a knife and fork! So our hands seldom touched our food. Hygiene was my parents main concern though. Dirty hands can spread germs like bacteria – leading to sickness.

In our text, when the scribes and Pharisees saw that the disciples of Jesus ate with unwashed hands their concern was **not** about hygiene. (The role of germs in disease was not well understood until the 19th century through the work of Louis Pasteur). The scribes and Pharisees thought that the problem was about the ritual righteousness they had tied to handwashing, but Jesus revealed that the root problem was their own hearts.

The theme of the heart runs through the Scriptures. For example, earlier we heard the command from Deut 10:16 “*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn*”. The word ‘heart’ in the Bible represents the basic orientation of the person from which come our desires, emotions and attitudes. Your heart is the centre your being. The seat of your mind and will.

We have already seen in Mark’s gospel how Jesus reacted to the Pharisees who sought to accuse him for healing a man on the Sabbath: ‘*He looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart*’ (Mark 3:5). When the disciples did not yet believe Jesus to be the Son of God, after His supernatural feeding of the 5,000 and His walking on the water, Mark records that their ‘*hearts were hardened*’ (Mark 6:52).

The Word of God reveals that true faith, true religion, true love for God is always - first and foremost - a matter of the heart, not of outward behaviour. If the heart is changed, then the whole person is transformed, but if only external, outward modifications are made, then the heart remains essentially the same. Washing your hands can never make you right with God. Behaving the right way can never make us right with God. Our text from Mark 7:1-23 reveals the vital truth that our hearts, yours, mine and everyone else’s are in need of supernatural renewal and cleansing. In other words, we naturally all have ‘dirty hearts in need of a wash’. We’ll look at Mark 7:1-23 under three points:

1. Human traditions
2. Divine commands
3. Uncovered hearts
4. **Human traditions (verses 1-5)**

We’ve already seen in Mark’s gospel how the crowds followed Jesus wherever He went during his Galilean ministry. Mark summarises this in the passage before our text, noting how the sick were constantly being brought to Jesus wherever He was, in villages, cities or in the countryside. It was a common superstitious belief in those times that the dignity and power of a person was transferred to what they wear. Even though the crowds thought Jesus to be ‘merely’ a miracle worker, they did evidence a faith (however misguided) that resulted, as they sought Jesus, in the blessing of them being healed.

In contrast, the Pharisees and scribes gathered around Jesus not in the hope that He would meet their need, but in order to criticize and judge Him. These scribes had travelled almost 150 kms from Jerusalem. A considerable distance to walk or ride a donkey. The scribes were experts in the Mosaic (Old Testament) law which they studied and then applied in minute detail to daily life. They taught that strictly following their elaborate rules was the way a person could be sure to live a righteous, ritually pure, life before God.

Mark refers in our text to these scribal rules and regulations as ‘*the tradition of the elders*’ (7:3). Hasidic Orthodox Jews still follow these types of practices today. For example, they must not push an elevator button on the Sabbath day, because that would be work. They get around this by programming the lift to stop automatically on each floor! We have already seen in Mark’s gospel how Jesus and His disciples did not meet the expectations of the Pharisees and scribes by following their traditions. For example by: sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:15-17); not Fasting (2:18-22); plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (2:23-28)

Now, in our text, their concern was about ritual defilement when eating with unwashed hands. The idea behind this was that a Jew might brush up against an unclean gentile, perhaps on the street or in the marketplace. Their hands would then be ceremonially unclean. This defilement would then pass to their food (they didn’t use knives and forks to eat!) and so into their bodies making them unclean. It was also possible that they might touch a cup or a pot, or some other kitchen container with unclean hands and by this means their food might become ritually defiled. Like the Hasidic Jews with their elevator solution, they solved this problem by washing their cups, pots, and copper vessels (as Mark explains to his Gentile readers in verse 3). Of course there was the additional possibility that they might transfer uncleanness from their clothing to their couches and then this might dirty their hands when they reclined at the table to eat. You can probably guess their solution for this difficulty – wash the dining couch!

It all sounds quite silly to us, but for the scribes and Pharisees this was deadly serious. It was to them the essence of true religion. They loved their own ‘orthodox doctrine’ and followed it meticulously.

(As an aside, it is helpful to note that the Greek word translated ‘wash’ in verse 4 is ‘baptidzo’ from which our English term ‘baptise’ comes. Some Christians believe that this word always means ‘to totally immerse in water’ but this is not true. The scribal tradition did not require the total covering with water of people, cups, pots and dining couches – a small quantity of water was generally ceremonially sprinkled over these items).

Remember that the scribes were diligent students of the Old Testament Scriptures. They wanted to be right with God. They desired righteousness. The source of their elaborate ritual washings can be traced back to the Mosaic Law that we read earlier from Exodus 30:17-21. Before the Aaronic priests entered the Tent of Meeting, they were required to wash their hands and feet. This ceremonial action symbolized the need for a person to be pure in order to enter into the presence of the Holy God of Israel. The scribes had ‘put a fence around’ this Law of God and created a whole system of ritual washings with the idea that this was the way to ensure that you were acceptable to God.

At times, churches today follow this type of approach. Here’s an example from a congregation I used to be familiar with. I think the leaders there reasoned that because Scripture says, ‘*I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man*’ (1 Tim 2:12) we won’t allow any women to operate the sound desk because controlling the volume of the preacher could be said to exercise some authority over him.

All churches have some traditional practices. Even if they completely change their historical patterns, they just create new ones. Traditions are not wrong in, and of, themselves. In fact, Scripture reveals the importance of good tradition, for example in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 where Paul writes “*So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the* ***traditions*** *that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter*” (also 1 Cor 11:2,23; 2 Thess 3:6). The Greek word translated ‘tradition’ literally means ‘to give from the presence of’ that is ‘to give personally’ and refers to that which is handed down from generation to generation. (We find the root of this word in 1 Corinthians 11:23 where Paul writes “*For I received from the Lord what I also* ***delivered*** *to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread*”).

When the New Testament refers to traditions in a positive light, it is always the ‘traditions’ that the Apostles taught. These are summarised in the Apostles’ Creed, and reflect the truth of God’s Word. In contrast, the scribal ‘tradition of the elders’ was contrary to the commands of God, which brings us to our second point

1. **Divine Commands (verses 6-13)**

In this church, we have a tradition of having an elder shake the hand of the person leading a worship service. This signifies that the preacher is approved by those whom the Lord has called to shepherd the local flock of God (1 Pet 5:2). This practice goes back to a pattern followed by Reformed Churches in the Netherlands at a time when preachers of false doctrine could be imposed on a local church by the State. We also have something of a tradition that ministers generally wear a tie. This reflects a western cultural association of a suit and tie with formal tidy clothing and also, to some degree, social standing and authority. In our ‘Sing to the Lord’ psalter hymnal, we have a number of Genevan Tunes which go back to the Genevan Psalter, a collection of the psalms set to metrical tunes under the supervision of reformer John Calvin.

These traditions, and others, can be helpful in our congregational worship as long as we understand that they are not required by Scripture. It is also important that we are willing to consider changing them **if** they become stumbling blocks for people in coming to Christ. The 19th century English evangelical Anglican bishop J.C. Ryle observed that many church traditions begin as useful practices, but then over time they become necessary practices and can evolve into idols. For example, some Christians do not believe that they are truly worshipping God unless there is an organ, others think that a 20-minute period of chorus singing is essential, or that Sunday school during the service is indispensable or that the preacher must wear a robe or gown.

Traditions can be helpful in church life, but they can also be very dangerous. The problem with the human scribal traditions that Jesus was accused of breaking was that they replaced the divine commands of God in His Law. In our text, Christ revealed this by quoting from Isaiah 29:13 and applying the Word of God directly to the scribes and Pharisees: "*Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "' This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men*." (Mark 7:6-8)

In the ancient world, it was a custom for Greek and Roman actors to speak into large masks that were part of their elaborate face coverings with mechanical devices for enhancing the force of their voice. The Greek word for such an actor was ‘hupokrites’ from which we get our English term ‘hypocrite’. Using Scripture alone Jesus ‘unmasked’ the scribes and Pharisees. A hypocrite is ‘a person who claims or pretends to have certain beliefs about what is right but who behaves in a way that disagrees with those beliefs’.

I remember once knowing a man who would only sing psalms, but not hymns, in the worship service. This was a matter of his personal conscience and I respect that position when held by others with a conviction that this is what Scripture requires of them. However, after this particular man had left his wife for another woman, I saw him in church remaining silent whilst the congregation around him sang a hymn. It seemed to me that he was ‘*neglecting the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness*’ to quote the words of Christ in Matt 23:23.

The scribes and Pharisees were pretending to be truly righteous, but in reality, they were the complete opposite: truly unrighteous. Jesus exposes them by shining the light of God’s Word on them. He first quoted the fifth commandment ‘honour *your father and your mother*’ (Mark 7:10). Then He described their practice of dedicating their possessions as a gift to God. If a son declared his property ‘corban’ to his parents, he neither promised it to the Temple nor prohibited its use to himself, but he legally excluded his parents from the right of benefit. So, appearing to be deeply religious, a person could mask their selfish breaking of God’s command to honour their parents. It would be like someone in the church saying to their elderly mum and/or dad, ‘*I’d like to* *help to finance you into a rest home but unfortunately I cannot because I’ve pledged to give all my extra money to the church*’.

Jesus just gave one example, but he said to those followers of the scribal tradition that they made void the word of God by their tradition that they had handed down, ‘*And many such things you do*’ (v13).

The Protestant Reformers saw the same pattern in the Roman Catholic church, for example: A full calendar of ‘saints days’ during the year effectively replaced the Scriptural Lord’s Day. The elaborate system of indulgences, purgatory, worshipping religious relics and penance made void the gospel of grace. I imagine many leaders in the Roman Catholic church thinking ‘*our traditions cannot be wrong…. we’ve been following them for centuries’* or ‘*if we change these practices, it will disrupt the church, cause division and lead to lazy people in the pews who think that they can be saved by grace alone and who look to Scripture alone as the ultimate authority for religion*’.

Because it is true that, as John Calvin famously said, ‘the human heart is a perpetual idol factory’, useful (and not so useful) traditions tend to evolve into ‘necessary practices’ then becoming idols which replace the true worship of God. We would be unwise, naïve and blind to the revealed truths of our text if we thought that we, as a church are immune to this. It is therefore essential that we are always willing and ready to test everything we do against the rule of Scripture rather than just saying ‘*we have always done it this way*’ or ‘any *change would disrupt the church and might cause division*’.

Is it not true, brothers, sisters, friends, that we naturally prefer to please ourselves rather than to please God? We would rather try to bend the Scripture to fit our ideas, than conform our minds to God’s revealed truth. Why, because naturally our hearts are ‘*deceitful above all things and desperately sick*’ (Jer 17:9). All too easily our hearts drift away from the Lord – which brings us to our third point:

1. **Uncovered hearts (verses 14-23)**

A skilled surgeon can open up a person’s chest cavity to reveal the beating four-chambered cardiovascular pump that is called the heart. However, the Scriptural heart - where our motives, emotions, thoughts and desires lie - is hidden to others, and often obscured to ourselves, either through ignorance or intentional blindness. With us, the heart is often covered. This is not so with God, as He said to His servant Samuel: “*The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart*" (1 Sam 16:7b).

Brothers and sisters, friends, God discerns your thoughts from afar (Ps 139:2). He uncovers the human heart, revealing what lies within. This is what Jesus masterfully did when He ‘unmasked’ the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees. Jesus is the divine Son of God who knows what is inside the hearts of all people (ref. John 2:25). He is the Living Word, ‘*sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart*’ (Heb 4:12).

Having uncovered the hearts of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus turned to the crowd around Him and said: "*Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him*" (v14b-16). Your heart – your motives, emotions, thoughts and desires do not become dirty – that is corrupt and unholy by failing to wash as prescribed by the scribal tradition. In fact, your heart is not contaminated by any substances taken into the body but by what comes out from within you.

Once Jesus had left the crowd and was in a house with His disciples He provided them with further instruction, saying: "*Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him*” (v18). As an extended aside here:

Please note that by His words here Jesus did not remove the Mosaic Laws on purification (e.g. Lev 11:1-47; Deut 14:1-20) here or declare the distinctions between clean and unclean to be no longer valid (cf. Matt 5:17). However, Mark does interpret the result of the fulfilment of the ceremonial law through Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross when he writes in verse 19 “*thus he declared all foods clean*”. The early New Testament church wrestled with the issue of Jewish food laws (e.g. Gal 2:11-17; Rom 14:14; Col 2:20-22). Mark’s comment here may indicate that some of his first readers in Rome struggled to accept that the Old Testament ceremonial food laws no longer applied now that they had been fulfilled in Christ (ref. Rom 14:14)}.

Our external actions are no**t** the root cause of unrighteous, it is our hearts that are the source of our uncleanness before God. Jesus explains "*What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person*." (Mark 7:20-23).

The heart has always been the focus of God’s revelation to us about ourselves. Obedience to the Law of God cannot save us because we are incapable of fulfilling the good and perfect requirements of God. As Paul writes “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Rom 3:23). All of us have ‘dirty hearts’ and we are all in need of a wash. The problem is that no solvent we have, no water, no detergent, no cleaning agent can remove the sin that stains us within. The ceremonial washing of the priest using the water from the bronze basin merely pointed to the need for purity before God.

The only way to have a clean heart is to be supernaturally changed by God from within. This truth is reflected in our form for baptism “*Baptism, whether by immersion or sprinkling, teaches that sin has made us so impure that we must undergo a cleansing which* ***only God can accomplish***”. A person is saved when God makes their heart clean in His sight through His gracious work of causing them to be born again (John 3:3), as Paul explains to Titus: “*He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:5)

Brothers and sisters, the righteousness we have before God is not our own, it is Christ’s. The impurity, uncleanliness, in our hearts has been paid for by the sacrificial death of Jesus in our place. “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21). We could say that God made His perfectly clean Son dirty so that we could have clean hearts before Him. This is the gospel. We are justified – made right before God -by faith alone in Christ alone.

Do you believe this? or are you still relying on your own ‘righteousness’? Perhaps making up rules, traditions, for yourself that make you feel more holy, more acceptable to God? This is not the way to be righteous. Saving faith in Jesus Christ is the only way (John 14:6). So come to Him today and present your heart to Him. Yield to His Word as the Holy Spirit teaches you (John 14:26), guides you (John 16:13) and convicts you concerning sin and righteousness and judgement (John 16:8).

So what about the *evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness (Mark 7:21-22)* that people like you and me come to see and yet still linger in our own hearts and therefore in our attitudes, words and behaviour? The dirtiness, impurity, uncleanliness, sin of these things is removed progressively from our hearts through the ongoing process of sanctification as we repeatedly turn again and again to Jesus in repentance and faith. As the heart is changed by the Holy Spirit to become more like the heart of Christ, the Son of God, outward behaviour words, thoughts and actions change to become more godly. This is pleasing to God, and it is very beneficial both for us and for others.

It is good practice to wash your hands before eating but what is absolutely essential is that you and I come to Christ in faith bringing our dirty hearts to Him so that they can be cleansed:

Firstly, once and for always, by being justified so that we are declared righteous before God.

Unbelieving friend – Come to Christ in repentance and faith!

Secondly, progressively being sanctified so that we become more and more godly in our living and so honour God as we present our bodies as a living sacrifice to Him for His glory.

Brothers and sisters – keeping coming to Christ offering up your willing heart in repentance and faith. Shortly we’ll sing together psalm 139, including the last stanza:

*“Search me, O God, and know my heart well.*

*All my anxious thoughts please test and know.*

*See if any offensive way be in me,*

*And in the way everlasting lead me home”*

AMEN.