

TRUE SPIRITUALITY

Mark 7:1-23

What is true spirituality? What does it look like? That's a good question because this is something that the religious and unreligious world is very confused about and it's something that Jesus addresses today in Mark chapter 7 as He has another confrontation with the religious leaders of His day.

We're in Mark 7:1-23...

“The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him what they had come from Jerusalem, and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.)

The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?” And He said to them, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”

He was also saying to them, “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your traditions. For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, is to be put to death’; but you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, whatever I have is Corban (that is to say, given to God),’ you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that.”

After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, “Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. [If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.]”

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. And He said to them, “Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”

I. THE PHARISEES QUESTION JESUS & THE DISCIPLES (VV. 1-5)

Alright, so as we come to chapter 7, we find ourselves in a new setting again. Jesus and the disciples have come back from the north-eastern side of the Sea of Galilee to the north-western side, Jesus walking most of the way (on water) while the disciples took a boat. And this side is the Jewish & religious side of the lake. And the scribes and Pharisees, the religious head honchos of the day,

having rejected Christ already, have come from Jerusalem to try and entrap Jesus and outwit Him and make Him look foolish because Jesus was really upsetting their status quo because He wasn't like them, and for good reason. In fact, **Jesus' ministry was aimed at freeing men and women from the oppressive, manmade, works-based system that these guys had conjured up over the years, which had become like a heavy yoke to bear.** When Jesus said, "Come to Me all who are weary and heavy laden" (Mt. 11:28) He was calling people out of their system.

And it's been a while since we've talked about that system so I'll refresh us on it. These guys, *who were thought of as being really spiritual*, had an entire system of mostly unwritten or oral religious teachings and traditions referred to as the **Mishnah** (when they were compiled later & written down). It was basically an entire list of rules to keep, to keep people from breaking commands in in the Law of Moses. If God's Law was a fence that wasn't to be crossed, the Mishnah acted as a fence before that fence. We've called it in previous sermons, **the 613 Fence** because for every one of the 613 commands in the Law, they had conjured up more laws – laws for each law. When given a specific statement or commandment, they asked, "How many new regulations could be logically derived from that original statement or commandment?"ⁱ

And I mean, at first glance, that seems noble. But it was anything but noble because you're **placing commands on people that God Himself has not placed on them.** That's **legalism**. And when you start going down that road, its hard to stop, because you just keep coming up with more rules. We call this legalism. And **legalism is like leaven** (Gal. 5:9). A little bit will grow and work through the whole lump of dough. Well, their system of legalism had done just that. It had grown into a great and oppressive system that was wearying and burdensome beyond belief. Legalism of any level will not only **unnecessarily burden** someone who really is a believer, but **it can keep people from seeing God's grace** and becoming believers in the first place.

But these guys had gone so far beyond God's Word that they weren't even teaching God's Word anymore because they had replaced it with their own teachings and traditions. **They had made their traditions and commands equal with God's Word or even surpassing God's Word.** In fact, it was taken to such an extreme that in some cases someone may contradict Scripture and not be considered a rebel, but should they contradict the rabbis (who taught Mishnah) then they were considered a rebel. So when Jesus says that by their traditions they invalidate God's Word, He's absolutely right. **They would passively neglect or even actively break a divine command from God's Word to keep the manmade traditions and teachings of men.** Studying and complying with the Mishnah began to take precedence over the study of Scripture at this point.

One of the areas they were highly concerned about was in regard to **ritual washings**. Now, there were symbolic ritual washings in the Law & Levitical priesthood but some were for just plain good hygiene and to prevent spreading diseases. But these men weren't concerned about good hygiene. When what they are concerned about by their question: "Why do Your disciples **not walk according to the tradition of the elders**, but eat their bread with impure hands?" they're concerned about breaking **the tradition of the elders** because part of their tradition was that they'd wash their hands before they ate in very specific ways.

They actually might wash before *and* after they eat. They washed before they pray. They washed after leaving a cemetery. They washed first thing in the morning. These guys would have no problem living in 2020! But even today, these rules are still unnecessary burdens among the Jews,

as there are handwashing stations all over Jerusalem. In verse 4 Mark also mentions how they had other rules, like bathing when they get home from the marketplace because they may have been around Gentiles, and also all sorts of washing rules for dishes (pots and pans and plates).

But what stands out about their question the most is that **they're actually more concerned about keep the tradition of the elders than they are about keeping God's Word**. These men thought they were truly spiritual and closer to God for keeping these man-made traditions but in reality they're less spiritual because they've replaced God's Word. God's Word, specifically the Law of Moses, never commanded the sort of extremism in washing that these guys were. They weren't concerned though about God's Word; they're concerned about breaking the Mishnah.

II. **JESUS RESPONDS TO THE PHARISEES. (VV. 6-13)**

He reveals what a great error this is. He quotes Isaiah, saying, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." He quotes Isaiah 29:13 and says that this is not only about the men in Isaiah's day but it's about them as well. They too, were guilty of **ignoring their sinful heart problem, all the while going through the religious motions**. They were circumcised as God commanded, but they're hearts weren't circumcised (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; Rom. 2:29). And one of the main reasons why, we know, is because they ignored God's Word.

❖ **True spirituality is serious about God's Word.**

Unless we are serious about God's Word, we will just end up doing our own thing, coming up with our own ideas about how to be spiritual. We may look spiritual, we may do spiritual looking things, and say spiritual things, but unless we get serious about knowing and applying God's Word, we will forever remain unconverted or elemental in our spirituality (Colossians 2:20-23; Gal. 3&4), not understanding God's grace and the importance of faith in Christ for salvation and sanctification. Legalism looks spiritual, but it's actually just the opposite. And what happens, it's been proven over and over again, is that man without God's Word ends up in external, performance-based legalism: We exchange a genuine, internal relationship with God with external rituals, **exchanging relationship for ritual**.

It doesn't get any more relevant to me than this passage. It always stands out because I was raised in a denomination where we spent more time studying that church's catechism than we did studying God's Word. That catechism, by the way, was full of manmade doctrines and teachings that directly contradicted God's Word – but how was I supposed to know? I didn't know God's Word. We spent more time going through external religious rituals than we did sitting under clear teaching and preaching of God's Word. We worshipped in vain. And it was these words in red, I remember vividly, that helped free me from that manmade religious system of works. "But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the traditions of men."

The only way to free people from those kinds of externalism for people to be cut to the heart by the Word of God that reveals their inner being. Hebrews 4:12 says, "The Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." That is why we hold fast to God's Word. That is why we say, with the Reformers 500 years ago, Sola Scripture – Scripture Alone. Scripture alone *is sufficient* to equip us for life and ministry (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

But then Jesus takes the lesson further by giving them a **specific example of their error**. He cites the Law of Moses which said to “Honor your father and mother”. Given the severity of the punishment for breaking that command, they should take it seriously. But here’s what they did: a son who had parents who might be getting up there in years and could no longer provide for themselves or required special care, and their financial help was required, to get around this command and to keep from having to providing for them, one could simply raise their hand and say, “**Corban!**” – basically, “Whatever I have [money, land, possessions, inheritance] is dedicated to God’s Temple!” And in so doing, the scribes concluded they were then exempt from their duty to provide financially for their parents. The son would keep on living with his money until he died and the leftovers be given to the Temple. Jesus & history says they did “many things such as that”.

Jesus called out this hypocrisy, which gives us another good principle about true spirituality.

❖ **True spirituality responds to God’s Word.**

It’s not enough to know God’s Word, we’ve got to respond by putting it into action. But notice, it’s not just a cold obedience to a dry command. You’ve got to the heart behind the command – to keep it is to love your neighbor or your parents, right? These men were constantly finding loopholes to avoid actually loving people.

Then Jesus harkens the crowd to Himself here because this is something He doesn’t want anyone to miss:

III. JESUS’ EXPLAINS THE HEART OF THE MATTER (VV. 14-23)

He says, “Listen to Me, all of you and understand” (don’t miss this) “There is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.” You see what He’s doing is He’s identifying the source of the problem because **the Pharisees have misdiagnosed the location of the problem. They think their problems are external and on the inside they’re basically good.** They’re not much different than modern psychologists – you aren’t the problem, it’s your environment they would say...

Many don’t understand that the problem is in the heart and if the heart is taken care of, then the externals will be too. I like what Schaeffer said, **we’re like icebergs: 10% of who we are is above surface and 90% of us isn’t seen.**ⁱⁱ The Pharisees were so focused on the externals, the 10%. It’s all they could think about and compare people by.

But just because we might be saved and born-again believers doesn’t mean that we’re totally free of this externalistic mindset. If legalism is going to enter our church, it may enter in with external criticisms about music or dress. It used to revolve around that and manmade commands like no dancing, no movies, no playing cards... and it’s good that we’ve recognized that for what it is and ditched it.

But I think that the most common form of legalism we struggle with is **faithless moralism**. Moralism is an emphasis on right behavior at the exclusion of genuine faith in Christ. It tends to reduce the Bible to a manual for moral behavior. You see, **I don’t think we are mainly concerned with following a list of man-made rules that go beyond Scripture – I think it would be a misuse of Scripture.** It doesn’t matter how moral someone is, even biblically moral, if they don’t see their need for forgiveness of moral guilt through faith in Christ.

It's important for us to remember that "Apart from Him, we can do nothing." That means that unless someone is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, they're hopeless to have any real victory over the sin nature. Until you come to faith in Christ, you don't have the Spirit of God and any cleaning up of your life is just reforming and not a result of inward transformation by a new heart.

It's important for us to remember that the commands of Scripture *for believers* are never just cold and dry commands. The commands that are placed on us are placed on us with the reality of who we are in Christ. Commands (imperatives) rest upon spiritual realities (indicatives).

➤ **Commands separated from positional truths result in mere moralism.**

This is something I want to teach us over and over and over again because it's a consistent teaching throughout the NT epistles. The indicatives (the realities about who we are in Christ) come before the imperative (the commands to live worthy of Christ). You see this in the structure of books written, like Ephesians – where Paul tells us in the first 3 chapters about all that we are in Christ. We're blessed with every spiritual blessing, he says. Then, in chapter 4 he says, 'Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you've been called.' Positional truths come first. Then you see it in the structure of single verses. "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ [there's your positional truth – you have been raised up with Him], keep seeking [tense=command to seek] the things above..."

What people need is to just a list of morals to abide by, as profitable and practical as they are. They that you can have it all together on the outside; you can clean up your life, but on the inside it can be a completely different story – like white-washed tombs who on the outside were nicely painted white but inside were full of deadness – or a cup that's clean on the outside but not the inside there's filth and no hunger or thirst for righteousness.

And when He goes back inside, He expounds on the lesson because the disciples question Him on it some more. "Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from the outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" Jesus gives them a **spiritual anatomy lesson**. The GI tract is not connected to heart. And the heart He is talking about really isn't our physical ticker, the muscle we call the heart. The heart He is talking about **the invisible part of you that is your control center** – your soul and spirit. It's like the steering wheel for your life and whatever is controlling that steering wheel controls you. And naturally, at the center of us without Christ is a sin nature, a sinful human heart. We have evil thoughts and steal and murder and covet and slander because **our hearts are sinful**. In other words you could say, "We're not sinners because we sin. We sin because we're sinners."

He's making the point that the defilement that came to a Jew under the Law who ate "unclean" food was caused not by the food itself but by the rebellious heart that acted in disobedience to God.ⁱⁱⁱ It wasn't the food, but the disobedience to God. He wasn't loving God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength. And Mark, writing years after the Church had begun, points out that Jesus declared all foods clean, probably not that He was cancelling the Law at that point (it was nailed to the cross later – Col. 2:14), but because it had become clear by then that Christians were to no longer to live under the Law. Mark is writing to Roman believers and we know from Romans 14, his mixed, Jewish and Gentile Roman audience struggled with what they could or could not eat still. They still had legalistic tendencies in them still, as do we.

But Jesus here, please note, doesn't give us this list of evils that describes our human heart so that if we just stop doing them, then we'll be made right with God. That's not His intention here. He's not preaching moralism. His intention is to get these Pharisees to realize that they are anything but right with God because they have sinful hearts. Their problem was that they thought they were basically good people and not sinners. They didn't see their sin and because they didn't see their sin, they were blind (Jn. 9:41). The Pharisee thanked God that He wasn't a sinner, but Jesus is basically saying, "Wake up! You know you're a sinner. It's obvious by these things in your heart."

❖ **Truly spiritual people are honest about their sin before God.**

They're transparent about their sin before God because they know God can be fooled.

That being said, if these things are what are in our heart, then one of the absolute worst but popular pieces of advice you can give someone is to follow their heart. Jeremiah was right when he prophesied that the heart is desperately wicked. It longs for wickedness. And no amount of external conforming, no religious works – no hand washing, no bathing, no baptism, no communion taking, no doing righteous deeds – will ever change the human heart. All of us must realize this, that trying to get right with God by performance-based rituals and religious works is like trying to putting a band-aid on your chest when you have a heart disease.

So what's the answer? How can we ever find any victory whatsoever? How does someone become truly spiritual? By receiving the Spirit of God through faith in Christ. True spirituality is not working for God's acceptance and love and security, but it is trusting in the One who did the work for us. On the cross, our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, died for our sins to pay the penalty we deserve for our sin.

❖ **True spirituality doesn't work for salvation but trusts Christ's work on the cross.**

And in this way, Jesus fulfilled all of the ritual washings and ordinances of the Law because they all pointed to Him. And like He turned the giant jars of purification water to wine in His first miracle in Cana, so by faith in Him He can make something sweet out of our lives as well.

The story doesn't end with verse 23. We have hope in Christ because on the cross He began the New Covenant, something foretold in the OT like in Ezekiel 36 where God promised, "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover I will give you a new heart and a new spirit within you; and I will remove from you the heart of stone and from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." There's a lot going on in that covenant with future Israel and with ultimate glory, but the point we need to see is that the New Covenant has begun on the cross and all who believe in Christ are regenerated on the inside – they're given a new heart and divine, cleansing nature. That means something dies and something new comes to life. Titus 3:5 says it this way, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior."

When you begin to understand this incredible grace of God in Christ and it's your constant focus, you're not a condemning critic like the Pharisee but a gentle and humble souls that hungers and thirsts for righteousness. You're gracious and patient with others because you know you didn't earn it by your works-based performance. The internal transformation by the gospel becomes visible on the outside.

If you're here today and you've never been honest with God about your sin and your need of Savior, take the time with me to pray right now. *"Lord I know I'm a sinner. I know my heart isn't clean but right now, I want to come to You empty-handed with nothing to offer except trust in Christ. I want to stop trying to be good enough and measure up by doing religious works and I want to trust the One who did the work for me on the cross. I want to accept Jesus Christ as the One who paid for my sins and receive that new heart through Your Spirit. It's in Jesus name we pray, Amen."*

ⁱ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of the Messiah from a Messianic Jewish Perspective, Vol. 2* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2017), 201.

ⁱⁱ Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, 1236.