

¹ Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) Mark 7:1-4 It is difficult for us to relate to the prevalent concept of the Jewish society in Jesus' day regarding impurity. Yet, outside of the Christian culture you will find it is common in much of the world today, and it is increasing in our own culture. The concept is that defilement comes from the outside. It implies that man is basically good and evil comes from outside us. It is an idea that comes from the fallen, wicked heart of mankind. In our arrogance we think we are generally good people, at least compared to others, and that our desires are natural and therefore good. We can justify in our minds almost any kind of behavior that pleases us. Occasionally our conscience will bother us, but we usually quiet it some twisted reasoning. That often comes in the form of blaming others for our faults. "I snapped at that man because my parents were too strict when I was young and it built up resentment that came out when this man ordered me to do something. It is all my parents' fault."

I have heard the painful stories parents tell of how their children abandon the faith they were raised in. They blame the parents for raising them in the oppressive religion of Christianity which they say ruined their lives. Now they have the freedom to do what their heart desires, which often means illicit affairs, drugs, ingratitude for all their parents did for them, and a life indulgence that looks fun on the outside but is empty within.

To an outside observer, that behavior seems heartless and selfish. What Jesus is teaching in this passage is that it is perfectly normal for sinful, fallen human beings. The Satanist golden rule is: "Do what thou wilt is the whole of the law." In the '60s the mantra was, "If it feels good, do it." Libertarians will add, "as long as it does not hurt anyone." The problem is that sin *always* hurts us and others. God's laws are given to us for our own good (Deuteronomy 10:12,13ⁱ). But laws alone cannot change our selfish hearts (Jeremiah 17:9ⁱⁱ). That is one of the themes that runs through the entire Old Testament (Jeremiah 2:13ⁱⁱⁱ; Isaiah 65:2^{iv}).

Righteousness earned by law keeping is central to almost every religion other than Christianity. The Jews of the era in which Jesus lived had taken rule keeping to the extreme. They recognized how readily we break God's laws, so they made laws around the laws. Some legalists even thought the oral law was more important than God's written law. They called those oral traditions a fence around the Law to help us live the Law.

To this point in Mark, we have seen numerous clashes with Jesus and the guardians of the Law, the Scribes and Pharisees. The clashes have usually been over Sabbath regulations, which had become so absurd that human need was ignored. In today's passage we come to what is perhaps just as important to the Jews of that day, the oral laws regarding cleanliness. Because they believed they were inwardly holy, they saw corruption coming from the outside, like a germ or virus infection.

The Pharisees were watching Jesus and His disciples' every move to find fault. Jesus has challenged what they take pride in and what sets them apart as special, so they

felt they must prove Him to be a false teacher. The infraction that they saw was that some of the disciples of Jesus did not go through ritual handwashing before they ate. The only thing about this in the Laws of Moses was for the priests (Exodus 30:18, 19^v). The oral traditions then extended that to the elders and to not only to the hands but cups and vessels and even dining couches. The law of God for priests was symbolic that their service in the tabernacle was holy, but traditions of the day interpreted it as literally cleansing evil from oneself. We see that with the woman at the well who was surprised that Jesus would drink from her pitcher. Jews thought the Samaritans saliva was like an evil virus you could ingest (John 4:9^{vi}).

The restrooms in the Tel Aviv airport and synagogues and kosher restaurants have pitchers on the sinks so you can ritually wash your hands. You pour a little bit with your hands pointed upward and let the water run down to your wrists, and then you turn your hand downward and pour in the opposite from wrists to fingertips. Voila! Your hands are ritually pure for eating. You may have an unforgiving heart, or have defrauded your brother, or use the loopholes in the oral law to keep from having to obey the written law and even one's own conscience, but you are ritually pure to eat... as long as that bowl is ritually pure and the food is kosher.

I think the best example of how distorted these purity laws were is when the Sanhedrin had Jesus arrested and brought Him to Pilate to be crucified. They would not enter the Roman building because the Passover was beginning and they had to be ritually pure to eat the Passover (John 18:28^{vii}). They are trying to have the Lord of life suffer a horrible death but had to be sure they were not ritually defiled in the process. Consider the irony of that! They wanted the One whom they saw as their opponent torturously killed but while staying ritually pure for the Passover!

⁵ *And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"* Mark 7:5 I picture this sneak attack as being clothed in an effort to sound sincere. A rabbi is responsible for the behavior of his students, so they asked, "Rabbi Yeshua, We were wondering why it is that you allow your disciples to reject the tradition of our esteemed elders in the failure to wash and thereby eat with defiled hands?" And of course, they said it so that the crowd could hear the accusation veiled as a sincere question. The whole point is not to hear the answer but to have the crowd hear the accusation and think less of Jesus and His disciples. They asked to be taught so Jesus is going to teach them from the Scriptures.

⁶ *And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."* Mark 7:6,7 Before Jesus answers the question, He is going to first expose their treachery to the listening crowd. Jesus tells the Pharisees that they are examples of Isaiah 29:13. *And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,* Notice that Jesus translated the Hebrew expression "fear of me" as "vain worship" because it is an insincere fear which is meaningless worship. It is man's rules, and not out of a reverent relationship with God. This is what separates true faith from religion. **True faith comes from a relationship with Jesus, the Word made flesh. Religion is rules that are man's ideas of how to please God.** The freedom we have in Christ is freedom from man's rules and expectations to live in relationship with God whom we follow out of love. The

Spirit that gave the Laws of Moses directs us in the details of life which cannot be defined by words. This does not mean we violate the moral laws God gave us in His Word. On the contrary, He applies them to our heart and thought life in ways the written laws could never define. How do you put in writing the checks of the Spirit to not respond to someone's comment? How can you make a law that tells you when to have compassion and when it is God disciplining someone? These directions come from walking in the Spirit in a life fed by God's Word (Romans 8:2-4^{viii}).

These Pharisees knew the written and oral laws in their entirety. They saw their relationship with God as being obedient to the details of those laws. But they missed the heart of God: compassion, grace, mercy, and love (Matthew 23:23^{ix}). They conformed their outward behavior but let their inward being wallow in pride and self-righteousness over their so-called obedience. They missed the main commandment, to love God with all your heart, soul, and might (Matthew 22:37,38^x). They imagined that it is fulfilled only in keeping rules. But so many of their rules were made by men without God's inspiration, misinterpreting the spirit of the law.

That is why Jesus called them hypocrites. The Greco Roman theaters had each actor play multiple roles. They would hold up a mask for a different character. That is the origin of the word hypocrite, an actor. In other words, what is on the outside is not the same as on the inside. People can be one way in public and totally different in private. They are actors. They want the praise of man so they present themselves in a way they think people will admire. The desire to be accepted by everyone is a universal human weakness.

I knew a man who everyone admired as a godly and decent man. But I also knew what he was like in private when he would become angry, curse God, and smash objects in his rage. Shakespeare declared that all the world is a stage and we are all actors in it. He was basically saying we are *all* hypocrites. To some extent he was right. But Jesus is saying there is another way. We can have a living relationship with God, walking in the Spirit, which results in living out the moral laws from the heart, not for the purpose of being accepted by men or God, but because we love God (Galatians 5:16^{xi}; Ephesians 5:2^{xii}; John 3:6^{xiii}). That is the supernatural work of the Spirit in the life of a believer.

⁸ *You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.*” Mark 7:8 Another issue Jesus had was with the priorities they set on the oral law over the written Law. They claimed the oral laws were from Moses, but there is no evidence of that. Some Jews even saw the oral law as more important. Jesus called some of the oral laws the traditions of men. Jesus gave on in the following verses.

⁹ *And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— ¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”* Mark 7:9-13 The traditions of men will often come in conflict with the Word of God. Some traditions may be good, but when they clash with the Word of God, the Word of God takes priority. Jesus was accusing them of intentionally looking to their traditions to get around being obedient to the Laws God gave to Moses. They were creating loopholes for their convenience. They even

violated one of the ten commandments. The fifth commandment orders us to honor our father and mother. Their tradition said you could get around supporting your parents by giving what would normally be used to help them by giving it to the temple. The parents might need twenty denarii for food the coming month, but you had a quarrel with them, or they would not do something you asked of them, so you can give that twenty denarii to the temple instead. They were nullifying the Law by using oral traditions men created.

They knew that was the case and could not give a counter argument to Jesus' words. Jesus added the stinger, "*And many such things you do!*" Then Jesus went on to answer their accusation which is another example of the oral tradition being incorrect.

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ 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." Mark 7:14,15 This introduction for everyone to come close, listen, and understand implies that Jesus is about to make an important teaching. Jesus nullified the food laws because He is the reality of that shadow.

According to D. Puffer, the food laws all pointed to not eating what leads to decay. Eating what is kosher pointed to what is wholesome. As the Word made flesh, Jesus is the reality of kosher. Thus, He said we must eat his flesh and drink His blood (which is take in His Word and His Spirit) if we are to have life (John 6:53^{xiv}). The shadow is no longer needed as the reality has come. This is the same idea as the washing of the hands. Holiness comes from Jesus who is our Righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6^{xv}). The Apostle Paul, who was once a Pharisee, explained to the Corinthians, *⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.* 1 Corinthians 8:8 He explained to the Colossians, *¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. ¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.* Colossians 2:10-17 All the things the Law pointed to are fulfilled in Christ (Luke 24:27^{xvi}). He made us alive with Him in His resurrection. We are filled in Him who is the head of all rule and authority. We answer to Him, not the traditions of man or even the ritual laws God gave to Moses, for they were figuratively pointing to Christ. If we choose to perform the ritual today, it should be solely to acknowledge how it points to Jesus (Hebrews 10:8^{xvii}).

Paul told Timothy, *⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.* 1 Timothy 4:4,5 And the author of Hebrews wrote, *Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.* Hebrews 13:9

Why are there so many verses on this topic? It is because what Jesus taught in our passage was a radical shift in interpretation. It is difficult to move from thinking rote obedience is pleasing God, to faith that knows Jesus is our kosher meal. It is understanding that communion is a symbolic meal of receiving Christ as our sanctification. The picture of that kosher food in the Old Testament was declaring that we must let our thought life and heart only take in what is pure, true, and undefiled, which is Jesus and all that He is to us.

Physical food cannot defile your heart and mind. It goes into your stomach and is washed in acid and on through your intestinal track and is expelled. It might make you sick if you eat something spoiled, but that does not affect your heart and mind. What does defile us is what comes out of our mouth and our rebellious actions which further defile our hearts and minds. Slander, gossip, vile language, and rudeness defile us. It seems so obvious, but this was a giant shift in the way Jewish believers saw the concept of kosher. That is why Jesus went on to press the point.

¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) Mark 7:17-19 This was such a change in the way the disciples saw food that they had to make sure that they understood what He was declaring. When they were alone with Jesus they asked Him about what they thought was a parable. It was plain speech, but as it was so out of the norm they figured it must have a hidden meaning. Jesus reiterated what He had taught. How can food defile your heart? Food goes into your stomach, not your heart.

Heart in the New Testament is not the organ that pumps blood but "refers thus to the *inner person*, the seat of understanding, knowledge, and will, and takes on as well the meaning *conscience*."^{xviii} Food has nothing to do with that. Therefore, it cannot defile us. Mark adds, "*Thus He declared all foods clean.*" Insert thunderclap! As we saw earlier, the Apostle Paul understood this. To this day, Messianic Jews struggle with this concept. As a compromise, they say they eat kosher not because it earns merit with God, but to honor the covenant God made with Abraham and Moses. That sounds good. But by that same reasoning do they still do animal sacrifices to honor the covenant? The sacrifices pointed to Christ the Lamb of God, just like kosher food points to our communion meal which represents Christ Jesus as our sanctification.

²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." Mark 7:20-23 Jesus concluded the topic with describing what comes out of our heart that defiles us. Evil thoughts: I think we all struggle with this. The old nature likes to remind us of some past pleasure we derived from sin. It never brings up the consequences, just the pleasure. Sexual immorality: What a driving power sexual sin is. We have a natural God given desire for sex to bond a married couple and produce offspring. But when we take it out of the boundary of marriage, it can lead to enslavement, compromises, and disease. In fact, for some it becomes a god. It directs their thought life and becomes the purpose of their lives. Theft: Most of us do not struggle with theft, but some certainly do. There is an

adrenalin high when some people steal items. This can be a desire for that high or just desiring things one cannot afford, which is covetousness. Murder: Very few of us have sunk this low, to end a human life, but we find ourselves hating someone who has wronged us and Jesus tells us that is the same as murder (Matthew 5:22^{xix}; 15:19^{xx}). The same is true for adultery. It is a sin that is tolerated in many cultures, and increasingly in our own. It is being unfaithful to your wedding vows to your spouse and to God. It distorts the picture of Christ and the church and symbolically represents idolatry (Ephesians 5:32^{xxi}). Coveting: A driving desire to have something, thinking it will bring you satisfaction. That is to deny that Jesus is our ultimate satisfaction. Wickedness: A more general category of doing something worthless, evil, or malicious. Deceit: We all experience this at some time in our lives. It is usually for personal gain, but it can also fit into the category of people pleasing (Ephesians 6:6^{xxii}). Sensuality: Living for the physical senses, for physical pleasure, which has become the norm in our culture. Envy: Like covetousness it wants what other people have, but more along the lines of their notoriety or looks but may include possessions. Slander: It is people speaking evil of others. This is one of the most prevalent defilements that we justify. We say that we are warning others, or asking for prayer for the person, or some other excuse to share something in their life that we do not like or just imagine may be happening. It has ruined many reputations. Who are we to judge another person (Romans 14:4^{xxiii})? Pride: This is the big one. It brought down Satan, and he would like it to bring us down (Isaiah 14:12,13^{xxiv}; Proverbs 16:18^{xxv}). Pride thinks more highly of ourselves and therefore less of God. We do not acknowledge that everything that we have comes from Him. Foolishness: To despise wisdom and be irrational. Some people will not listen to reason or instruction (Isaiah 32:6^{xxvi}). The old nature is usually foolish. Sin is always foolish.

These things do not come from what kind of food you eat. They come out of the heart of fallen mankind. They defile us and often others as well. If you want to get picky about something, be picky about what comes out of your own heart, whether words, or attitudes or actions. These reveal the condition of our walk with Christ. Baby Christians will stumble in many of these areas. The more we love Christ and yield to His life in us, the more we look to Him before we speak or act, the less these old nature habits will be evident. We will not reach entire sanctification in this life (Philippians 1:6^{xxvii}), but the more we look to the leading of the Spirit, the more we saturate ourselves with the Word of God, the more our mind and heart will be renewed and keep our old nature in check (Romans 12:2^{xxviii}). When we come to Christ for salvation, the work of our outer sanctification begins as the Spirit of God lives in us. Let us always cooperate with His work in us that we might point others to our Savior.

Questions:

- 1 What is the big picture the Pharisees were missing?
- 2 What was the particular issue in this passage?
- 3 What were the Pharisees trying to do?
- 4 What was Jesus' initial response to them?
- 5 What was His answer to their accusation?
- 6 What example did He give? 7 What was Jesus' shocking concept?
- 8 How did He illustrate it? 9 Why was it hard for the disciples to understand?
- 10 What comes out of the heart of fallen man?

i Deuteronomy 10:12-13 (ESV)

¹² “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?”

ii Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)

⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

iii Jeremiah 2:13 (ESV)

¹³ for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

iv Isaiah 65:2 (ESV)

² I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices;

v Exodus 30:18-19 (ESV)

¹⁸ “You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it,

¹⁹ with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet.

vi John 4:9 (ESV)

⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

vii John 18:28 (ESV)

²⁸ Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor’s headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor’s headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.

viii Romans 8:2-4 (ESV)

² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

ix Matthew 23:23 (ESV)

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

x Matthew 22:37-38 (ESV)

³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.

xi Galatians 5:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

xii Ephesians 5:2 (ESV)

² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

xiii John 3:6 (ESV)

⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

xiv John 6:53 (ESV)

⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

xv Jeremiah 23:6 (KJV)

⁶ In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this *is* his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

xvi Luke 24:27 (ESV)

²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

xvii Hebrews 10:8 (ESV)

⁸ When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law),

^{xviii} 1 Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990–), 250.

^{xix} **Matthew 5:22 (ESV)**

²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.

^{xx} **Matthew 15:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

^{xxi} **Ephesians 5:32 (ESV)**

³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

^{xxii} **Ephesians 6:6 (ESV)**

⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart,

^{xxiii} **Romans 14:4 (ESV)**

⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

^{xxiv} **Isaiah 14:12-13 (ESV)**

¹² “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! ¹³ You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north;

^{xxv} **Proverbs 16:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

^{xxvi} **Isaiah 32:6 (ESV)**

⁶ For the fool speaks folly, and his heart is busy with iniquity, to practice ungodliness, to utter error concerning the LORD, to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink.

^{xxvii} **Philippians 1:6 (ESV)**

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

^{xxviii} **Romans 12:2 (ESV)**

² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.