



Sermon

Mark 7:1-15, 21-23 James 1:17-27

2nd September 2018

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The Gospel reading today from Mark picks up the story after the feeding of the 5000 and continues with Jesus in his ministry around Galilee. He runs into opposition. The Pharisees are concerned with Ceremonial Purity (which is different from hygiene and different from moral cleanness). Ceremonial purity was about being able to approach God, but it could easily be temporarily lost by an action which is not a sin. If you had an ulcer or accidentally touched some dead animal.

The concern the Pharisees had for keeping the Torah had developed out of the exile. Not wanting to allow the nation to break covenant with God like that again, they strove for a high standard of law-keeping. In these efforts they did two things that result in their question to Jesus.

Firstly, they developed the idea of making rules which were a fence around the Law. These rules were more stringent so the people would not stray near the actual boundary of the law God had laid down. It is like the outer lanes on the harbour bridge – the actual limit is the edge of the road – if you go further left the car will fall off and you will die. So a fence is erected inside the true limit. As long as you keep inside the fence you are safe from the drop over the edge.

Secondly, they took the idea of Israel being a priestly nation to mean that every Jew should observe the regulations laid down for the priests serving in the temple. That meant that far more stringent laws were applied to the common people.

Putting those two ideas together, they had developed a set of rules about hand washing before eating. It was not specified in the Law only in their Traditions. They ask Jesus why his followers were not keeping the handwashing tradition of the elders.

Jesus replies that they are observing their own rules but ignoring the true laws of God. He gives the example of a practice to overcome to honour one's mother and father by dedicating one's money to God (*corban*). That meant it could not be used to help the parents but nor did the son need to give it immediately to the temple. So he kept control of the money and avoided obedience to the law.

The other instruction Jesus gives is that we are not made unclean by what we eat but by what comes out of us.

"Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean'."

Mark adds, "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean'." Here is a preparation for the later decision the Apostles would make that the Gentile converts did not have to keep the food rules of the Torah.

So what is important then to Jesus? He says it is what comes from us: what we think and do. Then we hear a list of immoral thoughts and actions which, Jesus says, make us unclean. Now we are not talking about ceremonial purity but moral purity. Now we are talking about sins which block our free relationship with God. What are these sins? He lists:

evil thoughts,	sexual immorality,	theft,	murder,
adultery,	greed,	malice,	deceit,
lewdness,	envy,	slander,	arrogance
and folly.			

That may give us pause for thought.

(1) Do we honour God with our hearts? Or are we going through the outward motions of pleasing God?

(2) Do we by teaching, whether with words or by example, encourage people to follow human custom/entrenched tradition which - on closer examination - is unsupported by the commandment of God?

(3) Are we showing the bad fruit such as Jesus describes while earnestly keeping to religious traditions – which we think should keep us safe?

What can we do about it? The reading from James may help us. It is thought most likely that this Epistle was written by James the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church.

He emphasises receiving life from the Word of God. It is by a word of truth - the Gospel message - that we are born again. James says:

“He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

The firstfruit offering was the giving to God of the beginning of the harvest. So James could say that the Christians were specially set apart for God.

V21: “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”

If we are going to receive sustenance from the Word of God, we need to be rid of moral uncleanness. James is writing to Christians. They need to turn away from sin and turn towards the words God would speak to them. But that also means humbly accepting God’s word in your life. Too often people are arrogant with the Bible. If we come to it with superiority, we will not receive the life it offers us.

Importance of the Word

Be submitted to the word – the word judges you - not you it. This happens whenever we read the Bible. Even at the great judgement, Jesus indicates that the Father has entrusted the role to him.

John 5:26-30 ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. ³⁰ By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.

However, a few chapters later, Jesus says he has handled the judgement over to another agent as well.

John 12:46-48 ⁴⁶ I have come into the world as a light, so that no-one who believes in me should stay in darkness. ⁴⁷ "As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. ⁴⁸ There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day.

Similarly, the writer to the Hebrews says the Word of God will judge us:

Hebrews 4:12-13 ¹² For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes

of the heart. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

It seems that judgement is like hot potato that the Father doesn't want to hold, so he passes it to the Son. But he doesn't want it so passes it to his word.

What does the word tell you about yourself?

James likens engagement with the Word of God to looking into a mirror. What do you see about yourself? It is helpful to ask ourselves questions when we read a passage: What does this tell me about God? What does it tell me about myself?

But if we just read it and don't do what we are commanded, James wrote we are like someone who looks into a mirror at his face and walks away and forgets what he saw.

Francis Schaeffer's wife, Edith, told a story of Prisoners of War held by the Japanese being fed good food but with castor oil added. The castor oil made the food pass through the gut too quickly for the nutrients to be absorbed so the men starved while eating food! In the same way, false interpretation of scripture can rob us of its value. Because we don't receive it with faith we fail to gain nourishment.

However, if we pay attention to what we learn from God's word, we can be nourished and grow. We can be taught and warned. It can do its job for us.

There is another instruction James gives and that is about what we say:

James 1:19-20 Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires

^{Verse 26} If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

Remember Jesus said that it is what comes out of our hearts that makes us unclean? He also said, Mt 12:34 "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

So James and Jesus are in agreement. Jesus tells us that uncleanness comes out of our hearts and is expressed through our mouths. James says we need to keep a tight rein on our tongues.

May God bless his Word to our hearts and as we attend to that Word, may we be continually transformed and renewed into his likeness.