

The Heart of Discipleship

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Mark 7:5-23

Some time ago, it was deemed 'inappropriate' for Christians to go into pubs. Do any of you remember those days? Or to buy a Sunday newspaper. And I well remember being told that going on a ski trip was a very worldly thing to want to do. Instead of, "by their fruits shall ye know them," it was "by their suits shall you know them," because we all wore suits to go to church. We were very easily identified as Christians by the suits that we wore.

And these are unimportant peripheral aspects of behaviour that have nothing to do with following Jesus. And the same thing was happening in this incident. Jesus' disciples were being watched by some pharisees, who had made the long journey from Jerusalem up to Galilee to check on this popular rabbi, to make sure that he was being orthodox. But they aren't genuine inquirers they are actually heresy hunters, trying to find out the point where Jesus was making mistakes and they discover to their horror that Jesus' disciples had eaten a meal without first going through a ritual hand washing, which meant pouring a jug of water over a hand, each hand twice. It wasn't a matter of hygiene, as at that time there was no understanding of how this transmission of infections was possible. They didn't understand that.

It was following a tradition that had been passed down to them. True followers of Abraham were to be distinctive in many ways. And this was one of them. And we still see that amongst Orthodox Jews today. Their black dress, (particularly with the boys), the ringed hair - a lot of things set them apart. And they wanted this to be something that would set them apart.

And interestingly, Jesus then says:

Mark 7:6 (Isaiah 29:13) | “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

Harsh words. And then he went on to say...

Mark 7:8 | “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

Now, interestingly, I have not searched it all the way through the first five books of the Bible. But, I am assured, nowhere in the Torah, in the books of the five books, the book of the law which all Jews were called to follow, there was no stipulation about washing hands ceremonially before you have a meal.

So where did this requirement come from? About two centuries before Jesus, a group of very devout Jews wrote a detailed interpretation of the Old Testament law, which was preserved in a written form called 'The Mishnah.' And, later, it was supplemented by additional details and then combined to form 'The Talmud.' The Torah is the first five books, Genesis to Deuteronomy. The Talmud was a set of detailed instructions. And it was ingrained into their minds that eating bread with unwashed hands was equivalent to eating excrement. That's how they saw it. It was ingrained into their minds of the Pharisees who'd come up to Jerusalem. So, they were disgusted that this rabbi was not demanding these high standards for his disciples.

But Jesus was quick to lay into them with his criticism. “‘You’ve let go of the commandments of and are holding on to the traditions of men.’” it’s fascinating, because what Jesus was doing there was emphasizing the importance of scripture over tradition - **the final authority being what God has commanded not the traditions that men have put on top of those.** It’s in God’s revealed word - the Bible, scripture - not in all the extra things. And in this way, very interestingly, Mark adds something. It’s just in parenthesis.

Mark 7:19 | “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.”

And it’s believed by scholars that Peter was the main source of Mark’s inspiration. And you will remember, because you’re all such biblical students, that Peter had that picture of food coming down (Acts 10:9-16). He was told there’s no food which is unclean. And, as a result of that, he went to the home of Cornelius and brought the gospel to him. Cornelius being a Gentile, a centurion. And so I don’t know whether it’s the case, but in the little phrase that Mark puts in, “in this way, Jesus claimed all food to be clean.” It might have come directly from Peter’s personal experience.

And then Jesus goes on to talk about Corban. Corban was ‘wriggling out of the financial demands that a man or a woman would have that should have been given to help his or her parents.’ It’s to do with honouring parents, or, rather, dishonouring. It’s a bit like first century tax dodging. It’s another example of how you’re ignoring God’s call: overturning the authority of Scripture to follow traditions. And he says it three times in various verses. No wonder Jesus ran into such conflict with the Pharisees!

Question for us. **Do we sometimes put traditions above Scripture?** Do we avoid buying a Sunday newspaper because it’s something Christians shouldn’t do? Do we follow some traditions in the Christian faith that may go counter to Scripture? I don’t think we do, but maybe we do.

There are a lot of things in the Bible that we do that are not in the Bible. For example, nowhere in the Bible does it say that when somebody is baptised, they should be signed with a cross. I don't think it says in the Bible that in order to secure a woman in your marriage, you must give her a ring. It's not in the Bible that people should wear robes or vestments when they're leading a service. And in some churches, the altar cloth is coloured differently according to different seasons of the church year. **There's nothing in the Bible about that.** Some Christians genuflect when they come towards the altar. Some Christians say the creed (we're going to be saying it in a moment). And, at the name of 'Jesus,' I remember my parents would bow when they came to the word 'Jesus.' Do you know, dog collars are not mentioned anywhere in the New Testament? (Which is why they're not worn very often).

None of these are wrong, of course. They can be quite helpful to give us a focus on different things. So, this tradition of hand-washing wouldn't have done any harm. They weren't actually thoroughly washing their hands in the way that a surgeon would wash his or her hands. But it had become a *distraction*. And they were missing the whole point, really. They were so bound up with the minutiae, that those Pharisees could not see who was right there in front of them. **They didn't realise that this man was God himself, the Messiah, who'd come to be with them.** It's a bit like not enjoying skiing in the mountains, in the snow, because it's 'too worldly.'

Jesus then went on to challenge their understanding of where uncleanness comes from. The Pharisees were convinced that sinfulness came from outside. So, they would avoid touching a dead body. They would avoid people with skin diseases like leprosy. They would avoid idolatry. Sexual fluids were regarded as something which would cause you to be contaminated. Now, it wasn't all bad because sometimes the Pharisees also recognised internal moral laws about honesty and integrity, about being greedy, about being faithful in marriage. But they really thought that if people could stick to the rules of the traditions, and they would follow those laws and traditions and ceremonies, eventually God would bring about his blessing and fullness of the kingdom, and they would release the people of Israel the Jewish people from the power of the Gentile rulers.

So, Jesus goes on to explain that it's not the external things that really defile us. We know that it's what's in our hearts and minds and he goes on to list these things.

Mark 7:20-23 | “²⁰ He went on: ‘What comes out of a person is what defiles them. ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.’”

If you have a look at this list, this very week we have seen very public examples of many of these characteristics. I don't know about you but I'm getting tired of seeing and hearing the lurid details of character failure. A quick word about how the news we listen to and watch can affect how we think about the world. Because, it does affect, it distorts, our image of how we see things. It's so rarely good news, that we develop a kind of cynical view of how things are in the world, and other people. Because the news outlets are in the business to catch our attention and keep us engaged. So, you ask folk whether they think the world is getting better or worse, and 80% will say, 'oh, it's getting worse,' largely because of what we see and hear. But actually - Peter Mandelson, Jeffrey Epstein, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, and Ghislaine Maxwell are the exceptions, I think. *Most people are not like that.* The more I see of people in all sorts of contexts, the more I realise there's an awful lot of goodness in people.

When you go on to *iPlayer*, you might be able to watch something on BBC this evening, which is 'The Lord of the Flies', the first of a series of four. 'Lord of the Flies' is written by William Golding. It's a story of how a group of boys were stranded on an island, and instead of working together, they soon band up and declare battle on each other. And one of them, of course, Piggy, is killed. William Golding had a very distorted view of human life and human beings, because of his own upbringing. But it's important to remember that it's *fiction*.

Now it has recently been discovered there was, in fact, a group of boys, who set out escape from their boarding school (which is always a good thing to do). They escaped from the boarding school and 'borrowed' a fishing boat from somebody in their village. And they set out at night, and they went off fishing, because 15, 16, 17-year-old boys do things like that. And they ended up in a really horrible storm and found their way to an island. And they lived on that island, a group of six boys, for 15 months until they were eventually found. It's very similar to the story of 'Lord of the Flies'. Guess what? All of them were in top physical form. All of them were in very good mental and emotional state too, because they had worked together. And when they had disagreements, they would have time out from each other, but they came back together and looked after each other. One of them broke a leg and they reset it and he was made better. I mean, it's a remarkable story of goodness.

Now, let's bear that in mind when we watch Lord of the Flies, because it's not always like that. In fact, in the UK, poverty has been declining consistently over the last 50 years. Health has increased phenomenally, which is why there are so many of us old people around. Vehicle theft and burglary have been on the decline for years. Violent crime is at its lowest level for 50 years, so don't believe all the doomsters.

We all know, though, that deep inside ourselves there are powerful sinful urges, like those. Which of us has not felt greedy, or been deceitful, or been a bit envious? Maybe, even slandered somebody? They're extreme passions, but I want you to think about how far you have come. We don't often do that, I think. We start our service with a word of confession. But actually, **we need to recognise and reflect on the fact that we are in the process of being changed.** And then if we're not, we have to question what we are here for. One of my daughters said to me not long ago "Dad, you've changed." I thought, "Oh? What does this mean?" But it was something nice. Emma said, "Dad, you're becoming more patient. You're listening better." She was meaning it, and I thought "Well, this is lovely to hear." And if we aren't slowly being reformed or transformed by Jesus, we are missing the whole point.

So why do we come to church? All sorts of reasons. I love seeing all of you people, lovely friends. I enjoy singing, music is important to me. I like listening to a not too long and boring talk. I like having a nice cup of coffee served by some beautiful people at the back. But the whole point of being part of a church, this body of Christians, coming to a church service, being part of a home group - do you know there are 17 home groups in this church, and 155 people who are members of this church are members of them? - **the whole point of that is that we want to grow closer to a sense of God in our lives, and being more like Jesus.** Having more love and forgiveness and concern for other people. Our readiness to forgive each other and to find that our hearts are slowly changing. **Us Christians are in the business of being transformed, not conformed by society.**

You know, in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 6:9-10), he says the Corinthians were greedy, were drunkards, were slanderers, were swindlers, were sexually immoral. But now, they had been cleansed and were being changed by the Lord Jesus Christ. This was the main purpose of All Saints following a book about this time last year 'Practicing the Way', by John Mark Comer. 'Be with Jesus, become like him, and do as Jesus did.' Of course, there's more to be done in each of us. There's still work to be done. Who has not felt resentment, frustration, feeling cross because you're being ignored, you're not being taken seriously? Usually, for me, it's when I'm tired. And I try not to let it out. I try to confess it and go and have a sleep and be fairly determined not to respond to whatever is causing me those kind of feelings. But **the change of heart is a day-by-day process.** It's not a flash in the pan. For some people, it does happen that with a deep experience of God in their lives their heart is changed. But actually, it's something that we have to work on, as we all know, like any relationship.

On my recent skiing holiday (which is a very worldly thing to have been doing), I came across this very helpful practice inspired by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. It's called 'the examen' which Ignatius encouraged the Jesuit followers to do. It's an end-of-the-day habit.

Think of your hand

Thumb	The good things that I'm thankful for (think 'OK')
Pointy Finger	Where can I point to God having been at work in my life today?
Tallest Finger	What stands out as being something which is important today?
Ring Finger	Where have I been my weakest today?
Little Finger	What small things might I try to change in the future?

Those of you who are guitarists or pianists know that the ring finger is actually the weakest one. 'Where have I not been my best today?' 'Are there things that I need to own up to or say sorry for?' And the little finger, drinking a cup of tea in polite company, or playing the violin. I don't know why, but anyway, it brings a bit of balance, apparently. 'With God's help what small things might I try to change in the future, tomorrow?' So think of your hand, think of those five things. Let's think of them again so that we don't forget good things.

To conclude - we can do nothing; we can buy; we can enjoy; we can eat. This can all be sinful, or well within the guidelines of scripture. We can buy a Sunday newspaper; we can go skiing; and we can even go into pubs and drink a pint of beer. That's all okay!

Sinfulness, uncleanness, comes from within us. Defilement comes from within, and we know it. And with each other's help, we are in the business of being transformed. You are being transformed by being here, by spending time with each other, by praying for each other. You are being transformed into the likeness of Christ, and that's a wonderful thought.

Closing Prayer

“Thank you, Father, that you have given to us a new heart and a new spirit that our hearts and our lives are being changed because of your work within us help us to recognize that help us to affirm one another in the way that we have seen each other being changed by your work within us. And we give you all the glory. Amen.”



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