

The Heart of the Matter-Mark 7:1-23

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October 1, 2023

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please get in touch with Pastor Derek at dberry@calvarybaptistsc.church.]

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Mark 7:1...

If you're like me, you've experienced the frustration of putting food in the microwave to heat it up, only to find that when the timer goes off, the food is hot outside and still cold on the inside. Well, I read that a relatively new microwave is on the market called the "Inverter." It's allegedly different from every other microwave. It heats from the inside out. In this microwave, the visible effects on the outside are determined by the changes brought about internally first. So, when you go to touch your food, you don't have to worry about cutting it in half to see if it's warm on the inside because what you feel on the outside is an outward reflection of the transformation that's taken place inwardly.

You see, many of the Pharisees in Jesus' day were like old fashion microwaves. They appeared hot on the surface. Externally, everything looked spiritual, but when the one who could peer into their souls arrived on the scene, he revealed that their inward state was still cold, much like a dead body. The Lord Jesus isn't against a hot outside. In the sermon on the mount, he supplies his people with kingdom ethics that they're called to follow. It's good for others to notice your hot godliness, but not at the expense of a cold, dead soul. God has an inverter salvation plan. In other words, he warms his people from the inside so that their outside is not a deceptive mirage.

In our text this morning, Jesus warns his people of the dangers of hypocritical legalism and clarifies where our actual problem lies, and that's in our hearts. Here are our two points this morning:

1. The Dangers of Legalism (vv. 1-13)
2. The Defilement of Lives (vv. 14-23)

Let's walk through the text. The scene begins with the religious leaders, namely the Pharisees and the scribes, coming from Jerusalem to scheme against Jesus. This

should come as no surprise as they've done nothing but oppose the Lord Jesus and his ministry since chapter two of this gospel. So, they continue to find ways to indict Jesus. The opportunity came in verse 2 when they noticed that some of his disciples hadn't foregone the handwashing ritual instituted by the elders of the people.

What we get in verses 3-4 is a clear indicator that Mark's audience consists of a great deal of Gentiles. Perhaps you remember that Mark is writing to the church in Rome. He provides commentary on a Jewish custom that would have been foreign to many within his audience.

This not only provides proper clarity to Mark's Gentile audience but for us as well. So, what's going on here? Let's reread verses 3-4. According to the law of Moses, only priests were required to wash their hands for the purpose of ritual purity. However, by Jesus' day, the tradition was for the washing of hands to be extended to all food since our hands are liable to be in contact with unclean things. To be clear, this religious group wasn't concerned with the sanitary state of the people. It's not like when you or I tell children to wash their hands before dinner. For them, it was a matter of ritual purification, which signified whether a person would be deemed clean or unclean because those deemed unclean were to be secluded from the covenant community.

As verse 4 states, many Pharisees would return from the marketplace, where they may have inadvertently come into physical contact with unclean food and literally baptized their hands. So again, this isn't just a regular washing of hands to remove bacteria; the term "wash" here denotes a ceremonial cleansing. Mark adds that they washed cups, pots, copper vessels, and dining couches. We find the same principle here. Certain containers and utensils could supposedly contract ritual impurity easily; therefore, they too, needed to go through purification before usage. Thank you, Mark, for that context. Now, we can move into verse 5.

Now, why the fuss over what seems to be such an innocuous question? If you're married, you know how a question that may seem innocent is actually an accusation. "Why haven't you done such and such?" Isolated from any motives, it's a harmless question. However, we're usually indicting our spouses when we ask. And that's the problem here. Suppose these religious leaders held a particular conviction and were genuinely curious about why the disciples didn't, perhaps to grow their knowledge further. In that case, I think Jesus would've responded very differently. However, that's not the case. And remember Mark 2. After Jesus tells the paralytic that his sins are forgiven, the scribes merely question Jesus in their hearts without verbalizing their complaint. And yet, Jesus responds to their opposing thoughts. The Lord Jesus knows the intent and spirit behind this question.

The religious leaders seek to condemn the disciples for failing to follow tradition. Herein lies the problem. The Pharisees are legalists. What do I mean by that? Well, you can think of legalism in two categories. Legalism appraises tradition and personal convictions as being just as authoritative as Scripture and, in some cases, even higher. The legalist will condemn you for dancing when the Bible doesn't prohibit it. Legalism also believes that the works of the law will merit favor in the sight of God. The legalist trusts in his own righteousness as the means by which he or she is made right with God. In other words, legalism focuses solely on the external rather than the internal. The Bible strongly condemns both sides of the legalistic coin.

But what's so sad is that it seems like these traditions began with the best of intentions. The Mishnah, a compilation of Jewish oral laws, says that "tradition is a fence around the law." In other words, the Jews understand the fencing of the law as a way of protecting God's Word and aiding his people to keep it. On its face, this is understandable, considering the idolatry and judgment that Israel experienced in the past. However, as the years passed, it began to produce some absurdities. For instance, looking in the mirror on the Sabbath was forbidden because you might see gray hair and be tempted to pull it out and thus work on the day of rest. You couldn't wear false teeth if they fell out, and you'd have to pick them up. But the biggest problem with how the Jews fenced was the elevation of their traditions as an authoritative law. Thereby, once again, inadvertently falling into the sin of idolatry, which was the same sin that they fled from! In verses 10-11, Jesus sets up this idea that "Moses (or God) says," but "you say." And for those familiar with the Sermon on the Mount, you'll know that this phrasing is very similar to the teachings of Jesus. "You have heard it said, but I say." Well, Jesus can establish law because he's God! These religious teachers think too highly of themselves by doing the same. So now they seek to condemn Jesus by way of his disciples, as teachers were responsible to their pupils, not because there was any lawbreaking, but rather because the disciples didn't conform to an extrabiblical command. Let's consider Jesus' response in verses 6-7.

Jesus calls them hypocrites, actors who aren't what they claim to be. There was a show on the CW entitled *Arrow*, based on the DC comic-book superhero, Green Arrow. Stephen Amell played Oliver Queen, AKA the Green Arrow. Imagine a rip-off of Batman with a bow and arrow instead of a belt of gadgets. While that show was still airing, a fan saw Stephen Amell on the streets, head-butted him, and said, "I want to fight the Green Arrow." Amell replied by reminding him he was just an actor. He's not actually who he portrays himself to be in the show with choreographed fight scenes. That person doesn't exist. It's just a mask he wears on set to make people think he's the Green Arrow.

That's the connotation that the word hypocrite carries in this context. The word is associated with actors who wore different masks depending on their roles. These religious leaders were nothing more than actors playing the character of those who were right with God and who sincerely followed God from their hearts. But the truth is, their hearts were far from the Lord, just as the false prophets of old. And this is why Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 to describe these men. They're just the new rendition of the false prophets in the Old Testament who lived unrighteous lives and oppressed others while simultaneously offering sacrifices and observing festivals and Sabbaths.

¹¹ "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ¹² "When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? ¹³ Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. -Isaiah 1:11-14

And since Jesus is Yahweh of the Old Testament, he's basically telling them that he's seen this before in their people back in Isaiah's day. And unfortunately, it's the same song today. "You accuse my disciples of having defiled hands, but you have defiled hearts." Let's reread verses 9-13.

Herein lies the danger of legalism. Ultimately, it rejects God's Word and establishes another. Israel had a commandment. "Honor your Father and Mother." This command implies taking care of your parent's needs as they age and cannot do so themselves. However, they created a manmade tradition of Corban, the Aramaic term for an "offering" or "vow."

In other words, although the financial support may still be in a son's possession if he's vowed it to the temple, it would be a greater offense in their mind to go back on this vow than to dishonor their parents. And there's the irony. The tradition of elders was supposedly a fence around the law to keep people from breaking it, but in the end, those traditions caused people to break the law!

It seems like the moral is that those who try to justify themselves by the Law end up modifying it to escape its authority. And if you think you can justify yourself by the law, then you have to change the standards because God's standards are too high! And here's what we find these religious leaders doing. Our house has a rule: no liquids in the bedrooms with carpet. Imagine me reiterating this to one of my daughters, who has a cup of water in her room. And then, 30 minutes later, I found her with another cup with

liquid inside. Let's say I remind her of the rule, and she responds, "This isn't water, Daddy; it's juice."

From an early age, we have legalistic tendencies, don't we? We find ways to disobey commands outright, or at least the spirit of commands, in ways that leave our consciences clean. When in reality, we're only searing our consciences. We may have more Pharisees in us than we realize. Before we transition to the next point, let's consider a few points of application.

First point. Perhaps you're here under the impression that Christianity is a works-based religion. In other words, as long as you treat others as you'd like to be treated, seek the betterment of society, and involve yourself in religious activities, this somehow earns you the favor needed to make yourself right with God. In this passage, Jesus rebukes the thinking that focuses on external works, particularly those detached from a transformed heart, as the entryway into the kingdom.

Perhaps you've heard the story of two dogs. A German shepherd and a poodle. They were arguing about who was the greatest. The German shepherd asked the poodle if he wanted to test his greatness by seeing which dog could get inside the owner's house first, to which the poodle agreed. The German Shepherd went first. With its strength, it went up on its hind legs, opened its mouth, and put it on the doorknob. However, he couldn't turn the knob with his mouth, so he took his paws and began twisting and tweaking. After about ten minutes of trying to twist and turn with his strength, he eventually gave up. It was the poodle's turn. He went to the other door, got up on his hind legs, and scratched. The owner came and opened the door. Legalism requires hard work and lots of effort, and yet it gets you no closer to the eternal creator. In this analogy, the poodle relied on the owner's strength to turn the knob because he knew how to get his attention. Dear friends, meditate on the perfect law of God instead of creating your own standard. Realize that you fall short of God's glory; therefore, you need a savior and reject legalism and trust in Jesus for salvation.

Second, be careful of treating your own convictions and traditions as if they're in Scripture. The Pharisees were practicing this to the point of trusting in works to save them. However, saved Christians can commit this same error practically every day. This doesn't make them false teaching heretics, but erroneous, nevertheless. When God first saved me, I detoxed from all secular music. Considering my BC days, I think this was necessary for spiritual flourishing. But I took it a bit too far by stating that listening to any and all secular music was a sin. In this case, I went outside the bounds of Scripture.

And we do this often with movies, alcohol consumption, hats in church, and even dancing. You name it. To be clear, there's nothing wrong with having a particular conviction you follow because you believe it steers you away from sin. And there's nothing wrong with one addressing one another regarding matters of wisdom. The problem is when you make it a sin issue when the Bible doesn't. You may personally believe social media is toxic and that Christians would be wise to stay off. Amen. However, labeling it as sin, or even practically acting as if it is inherently sinful, is a Pharisaic tendency. Think about it. Do you have any personal convictions or traditions you've labeled as sins that the Bible doesn't? I'd admonish you to ensure a scriptural basis for your beliefs and actions. Be a text-driven Christian and not a tradition-driven Christian. The difference is crucial.

Third, fight against hypocrisy. As the Scripture plainly states, what's on the inner will impact the outer, not vice versa. This leads us to our second point this morning. Let's reread verses 14-19.

Once again, the disciples lack understanding, so the Lord Jesus graciously explains to them. His point: nothing that enters your body can defile your soul because it'll be expelled anyway! Thus, he declares all food clean. This entire transaction is similar to what we find in 2:23-28 regarding Jesus and the Sabbath. In both pericopes, we find religious leaders questioning/accusing Jesus' disciples of law-breaking. On both occasions, the religious leaders judge based on their tradition instead of Scripture. And both times, Jesus establishes a new relationship between the believer and an Old Testament command. You can find the sermon and transcript on our website for a more comprehensive treatment of the New Covenant Christian's relationship with the Sabbath. Here's a quick cliff note: Jesus fulfills the Sabbath and is, therefore, our rest. Rest from duty on the seventh day was a shadow, and Christ is now the substance, so we're no longer bound by that Old Covenant law. Similarly, Jesus is establishing a new relationship between believers and food.

The Old Covenant provided God's people with precise and stringent dietary laws that they needed to observe to be considered clean. Something new is taking place here. Now, to be clear, the disciples wouldn't have immediately understood this. If you read the book of Acts, you'll find much controversy and struggle on whether or not Gentiles were required to keep the dietary laws of the Old Covenant. So, for Jesus' original hearers, this message only referred to the greater importance of an inner purity stemming from the heart instead of the food regulations being done away with by the kingdom's arrival. Again, one would suppose that the apostles would have referred to this teaching when dealing with this issue in the book of Acts. As a matter of fact, Peter

is the one supplying this information to Mark (the author). In Acts 10, Peter still believes he needs to keep the OT dietary laws strictly.

It's Mark's commentary that includes the overarching truth that's conveyed within Jesus' teaching here. What is Jesus doing here? He's establishing the law of Christ. Many believers wrestle with this question: What is the relationship between the law of Moses and the New Testament Christian? Well, I believe we can find some answers here, and in the Sabbath passage we considered months ago. Let's consider a few points that are central themes within the gospel. First, Jesus is God. Therefore, he has the authority to establish law. If you've been with us, you know that a central motif within the gospel of Mark is Jesus' authority. Mark highlights the authority of Jesus to emphasize his divinity. Jesus has an authority over people that only God has. Jesus has authority over unclean spirits that only God has. Jesus has authority over sickness and the body that only God has. Jesus has authority over nature that only God has. Jesus possesses the authority to forgive sin, something only God can do. And Jesus comes with an authoritative teaching that doesn't need to consult rabbis in Chapter 1 and keeps establishing new laws regarding fasting and the Sabbath in Chapter 2, and now dietary laws in Chapter 7. All of this is to say that Jesus is God! He does not go to the mountain to receive a revelation as in the Old Testament. He goes to the top of the mountain to give the revelation!

Second, by Jesus inaugurating his kingdom on earth, he fulfills the shadows of the Old Testament that were our guardians and tutors to keep us until his arrival.

²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. -Galatians 3:23-26

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 2:16-17

This doesn't mean that we live lawlessly. We still have a law and commands to keep. The law of Christ has continuity with the Old Covenant laws because it's the same God, but there's also discontinuity, namely the dietary laws and the Sabbath. Consider the words of Paul here:

²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. -1 Corinthians 9:20-21

He distinguishes between the law of Moses and the law of Christ. The law of Christ can be found in the gospels and New Testament epistles. These teachings are binding on Christ's church. Therefore, we're still under a law, but that's not the law of Moses written on stone, but rather the law of Christ written on our hearts established by Jesus himself. Speaking of the heart, let's transition to our last point in verses 21-23.

The fundamental problem of fallen humanity is not what we do but who we are. This is radical news if you think that humankind is intrinsically good. The prophet Jeremiah makes this point.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? -Jeremiah 17:9

People often say, "The Lord knows my heart," to justify themselves. But in all reality, the Lord knowing your heart is what should scare you. And Jesus says it's impossible to impact the heart with outward measures. Denzel Washington starred in a movie called "John Q" many years ago. In said movie, his son had a deficient heart and, therefore, collapsed during a baseball game. Imagine if the doctors told him he just needed to do more cardio. That would be insane. What his son needed was a new heart to live. At the beginning of the movie, someone dies in a car crash, and the doctors end up using her heart to save John's son. Someone had to die for him to live by receiving a new heart. This is the gospel!

Outward deeds don't change our hearts. Lawkeeping doesn't church our hearts. Church attendance doesn't change our hearts. Good deeds don't change our hearts. Social action doesn't change our hearts. The only answer is a regeneration of the heart. The Pharisees had a defective theology of man and sin, so they thought to treat the symptoms with their legalism rather than dealing with the root cause. They made the outside of the cup clean but neglected the uncleanness within. And so many do the same today. But hear the Word of God!

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give

you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. -Ezekiel 36:25-27

Regeneration, or the new birth, allows us to respond to the message of the gospel with repentance and faith. So, in closing, consider this application. After God supplies you with a new heart, thereby saving you from your sin, you must keep this attitude of dealing with heart issues instead of merely attacking symptoms. I've heard of many men who struggle with lust and think that some computer software or marriage will fix all their problems. And sure, those two things are good; however, unless you deal with your heart, you'll never be free. Or consider the monastic life. People think they'll be free from sin if they withdraw from all temptations. However, you can retreat from society until your dying day and still have sin issues unless you deal with your heart. I tell myself that if only my wife or kids would stop (fill in the blank), I wouldn't respond with agitation. When really, their actions only bring to the surface what was already dormant in my heart. Gospel Christians seek to get to the root of the issue, the heart of the matter, instead of merely dealing with surface issues. This is best done in the context of community within a local church where others can get to know you, encourage you, and rebuke you when necessary. Where in your life are you excusing your sin and blaming it on others? And where do you need to do some soul searching to get to the heart of your sin struggles? Thankfully, we have a God we can cry out to and trust that he'll sanctify his people for his glory.

Let's pray.