

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL CLEANLINESS

(Mark 7:1-23)

9.5.21

INTRODUCTION

[S]peaking the truth in love — Paul, Ephesians 4:15a. This is a phrase Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesian church. Remembering the context of Paul’s words being written to a body of believers, the idea is a simple one. But what is the truth to which Paul is pointing; exactly what truth is it that we are to be communicating in love? Two things:

1) The Scriptures: *“[God’s] word is truth” — Jesus Christ, John 17:17b.*

2) The life and words of Jesus: *[T]he truth that is in Jesus — Paul, Ephesians 4:21.*

That is always a tricky situation because, while the church should never be apologizing, never backing down, but fiercely defending biblical truth, the church is simultaneously always to be delivering the truth found in the Scriptures and in the life of Christ with a loving, empathetic, caring attitude. And of course, that only makes sense — how in the world can you deliver a message of love with anything less than a delivery of love coming from a genuine heart of love. But it can make for an interesting “intersection” — delivering a truth that won’t budge with a love that won’t change.

This is how Jesus delivered all His messages — always truth, but always in love. Can you imagine the challenge in that simple premise — to deliver the lifesaving, life-changing message of the gospel, and to do it while simultaneously being challenged by people who hate both the message and the messenger.

We’re just entering into the final year of Christ’s earthly ministry. And today we’re going to be looking at Christ’s ongoing teaching ministry to an audience that included both the crowds who always followed as well as some religious leaders who had arrived onsite from Jerusalem. So, as we begin, let’s start **with a word of prayer.**

TEXT (Mark 7:1-23)

After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill Him — John 7:1.

OK, so when last we saw Jesus, He was watching people who had been following Him for a while begin to desert Him. His teachings were seeming to be too difficult to understand, and possibly more personally demanding than they cared for.

What’s important for us to remember these 2,000 years later — in this era of “political correctness” and “cancel culture” and “wokeness,” and whatever else is going on — in this time where it seems far easier to divide and destroy than to reconcile and restore, all of this wrapped up in people with skin as thin as single-ply toilet paper, Jesus never changed His message; He never tried to make His words easier to receive. If Jesus was here today, preaching His undeterred, undiluted, unwavering message, I got a feeling that, as people began abandoning Him like they did at the end of John 6, there would be a whole boatload of consultants all lined up to help Him: “Yo, Jesus, you’re losing people, man. I mean, you started out great, but these last few messages have been flat-out disasters; you know what I mean? If you don’t fix that quick, you’re gonna end up preaching to the wind. You wanna keep people engaged, you wanna make an impact, you gotta sell your message in a more attractive way. I mean, think about it; what’s the point of talking if nobody’s listening to

you?” But Jesus never apologized for His message — He never changed it and He most certainly never softened it. Plus, He never defined Himself in terms of large crowds or growing influence. Speaking truth, teaching truth, demonstrating truth was all that mattered to Him. And the only impact He cared about regarding His many crowds was whether or not they were coming to understand His message. If His messages were being received and being claimed to change lives, if people were beginning to grow into the people that God had in mind for them to be, that was the important thing; in fact, that was the only thing that mattered.

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of His disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) — Mark 7:1-4.

Jesus was staying in Galilee while continuing His ministry; in fact, He likely is in Capernaum at this time. So, if He wasn't coming to them, the Pharisees and their associates decided to come to Him. It says something to their eagerness to find some fault with Jesus that their walking some 70-80 miles to disrupt His ministry was worth the effort.

Now it was always their goal to find something, either in what Jesus said or did, that would discredit Him and bring some level of skepticism against Him that would maybe make the crowds fall out of love with Him — causing a loss of His influence and maybe some restoration of their own. I mean, He had quite a track record over these past two years of making the religious leaders look like a bunch of cranky, petty idiots. Very few people are fond of that particular reputation.

So, with that goal in place, they traveled to Galilee from Jerusalem and started observing all that was going on with Christ. And soon, they began to focus their attention on His disciples — in particular, their lack of observance of Jewish laws regarding cleanliness. Simply put, Christ's disciples weren't washing their hands before they ate. How disgusting! Now how could any self-respecting rabbi allow such a thing? I think we need to call Him out on that.

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don't Your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?” — Mark 7:5.

This seemed easy; they had watched the disciples with their own eyes, eating with unwashed hands right in front of them. So OK, Jesus; argue your way out of this one. But there's a problem, and the Pharisees actually bring it up themselves: The disciples were not living according to the tradition of the elders. Now that might have been true, but Jesus was the wrong guy with whom to make that argument. In other words, they were still idiots. They should have known by now that Jesus couldn't have cared less about the all-too-human “tradition of the elders.” He had only one concern — bringing people into God's kingdom by bringing them into harmony with God's word. That had absolutely not one thing to do with any religious rules. But there were a couple of other things at play here as well as the Pharisees made their accusation:

First, they had a dangerously wrong idea about the significance of sin and personal purity. For the Pharisees, outward behaviors always held the key to holiness, so they considered something like handwashing to be critically important to avoiding defilement and remaining pleasing (at least in their view) in God's sight. In other words, they saw sin as some-thing that could simply be washed away and taken care of by their own human efforts.

And secondly, their allegiance to these rituals often separated them from the very people they were supposed to be shepherding. They looked on themselves as superior to the great multitudes of the unwashed because they, of course, in contrast to these repulsive commoners, were observing every last "jot and tittle" of the "tradition of the elders," thus alienating and separating themselves from the very people they were supposed to be mentoring. Unlike the people who surrounded them, they were pure; they were holy. And in their fancy robes and their ability to quote from virtually every sacred text you could think of, you can almost hear them saying: "You know, the world would be such a better place if everybody was as clean and smart and pleasing to God as we are." So, when they chose to challenge Him over the disciples' unhygienic behavior, Jesus, as always, was ready with His answer.

"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. They worship Me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions" — Jesus Christ, Mark 7:6-8 (quoting Isaiah 29:13).

You can't say that Jesus worried about being politically correct — "you hypocrites." When we remember that the word derives from the idea of playing a role in a theatrical production, hiding one's true identity behind a mask, we begin to understand that Jesus was using the word "hypocrite" very deliberately.

And then Jesus did something that is incredibly smart when dealing with issues that His opponents brought up — He referenced Scripture. In our terminology, He was asking, "What does the Bible say?" But He asked them with words from the prophet Isaiah that they would have — or should have — already known. And in doing so, His reference to scripture put their hearts under a spiritual microscope as He quoted from the OT prophet Isaiah, who was writing down the words of God Himself! Simply put, God was telling them: "Your words of worship mean nothing to Me because, in your hearts, I mean nothing to you. You're playing a role, with manmade words supporting manmade rules for a manmade religion made up of manmade nonsense that has not one thing to do with either Me or My commands."

He then goes on: ***"You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! [And just in case they were a little fuzzy on what He was talking about, He gave them an example.] For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother (the fifth commandment),' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God) — then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that" — Jesus Christ, Mark 7:9-13 (quoting Exodus 20:12 [the fifth commandment] and Leviticus 20:9).***

The fifth commandment was incredibly important because it highlighted honoring parents as the most important of human relationships — and yet the Pharisees and others in leadership

did exactly that. It was a practice called “corban” which allowed somebody to devote something to God. But by doing so, it risked depriving parents of support they might need, and was due to them according to Scripture. If something intended to support their parents (of which most of them had ample resources) was instead designated as a gift to God, it could no longer be used to help their parents because it could now only be used for a spiritual purpose. Yet they continued due to their position to receive the benefits of that gift — without having to even consider their parents.

And Christ’s words, *[Y]ou do many things like that*, can be found reflected in a line from the *Mishnah*, the written collection of Jewish oral traditions: “*It is a greater offense to teach anything contrary to the voice of the Rabbis than to contradict Scripture itself.*” That is a staggering commentary on their view of themselves, their elders and their traditions versus their view of God and His prophets — which Christ highlights when He says: “**Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition [“for the sake of your tradition” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 15:6b] that you have handed down**” — *Jesus Christ, Mark 7:13a*, literally telling them that their tradition was taking God’s words and making them meaningless!

Again Jesus called the crowd to Him and said, “Listen to Me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” [“If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”] — Mark 7:14-15 [16].

At this moment, Jesus shifted His attention from the accusations of the religious leaders to the crowd gathered around and listening to all of this. And He makes a very simple point, again trying to get people to turn their focus from physical, external issues to inner spiritual ones. “Guys, dirty hands are not going to keep you from the kingdom of heaven. Impure thoughts, impure actions — that is where your focus needs to be because those are the things that will keep you from the kingdom.” And having said that, He separated Himself from both the leaders and the crowd and, according to Mark, “entered the house,” likely a place He stayed while in Capernaum.

Now Matthew interjects a part of the conversation that Mark doesn’t include, but it’s hugely important for us to consider: ***Then the disciples came to Him and asked, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?” He replied, “Every plant that My heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit” — Matthew 15:12-14.***

Just three verses, but some profound impact. Jesus calls out to every unbelief there is — every false statement, every false faith, every false teacher — and says that God himself will deal with all that. Which means: Islam — gone. Judaism — gone. Buddhism — gone. Mormons — gone. Jehovah’s Witnesses — gone. Hinduism, Confucianism — gone. Secular humanism, Wicca, atheism, and anything else outside of Biblical, fundamental Christianity — gone. So, anything outside that one and only parameter — the truth of God’s word and the truth of God’s Son — will be gone, “pulled up by the roots” by God Himself. Why God Himself? Because He is the one most singularly offended by false teachings. He has said, “My word and My Son — that’s enough.” And every single one of those false teachings have said: “No, that’s not enough; we need to offer more.” Don’t ever wonder why false teaching is so

offensive to God. They are essentially telling God that He is a liar, that His ways are not right, that there must be something more than simply God and His ways.

And then Jesus so accurately defines the truth behind every single false teaching in the history of mankind: Blind guides, who are destined (along with their followers) to face plant into a pit from which there will be no escape. Nobody can say they weren't warned.

After He had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples asked Him about this parable. "Are you so dull [without understanding]?" He asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil [depraved, worthless] thoughts come — sexual immorality [fornication, meaning any sexual activity outside of Biblical boundaries], theft, murder, adultery [any sexual activity with someone not your spouse], greed, malice [the intention or desire to do evil], deceit [from a root word meaning to decoy], lewdness [filthiness], envy, slander [speaking evil against somebody], arrogance [superior attitude toward others] and folly [foolishness or recklessness]. All these evils come from inside and defile a person" — Mark 7:17-23.

Jesus is saying very simply that God takes no particular note of what people are eating, or whether or not their hands are clean before a meal. His sole focus is on what is coming out of a person's mouth because it is the things coming out of a person's mouth that reflect their separation from God by revealing their fallenness from God. Jesus Himself would say it very well: *"A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" — Jesus Christ, Luke 6:45*, these words reflecting what the Scriptures so familiar to that leadership would have already known from their lifetime of studying: *Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it — Solomon, Proverbs 4:23*. In God's eyes, the heart is everything! That's why He sent His Son — to fill every heart possible.

APPLICATION

Now the application for these verses seems relatively straightforward: "I'm not what I eat. I'm not whether or not my hands are dirty when I eat. I AM what comes out of me — not from my stomach but from my heart." Now, another way to look at that is with this question: "Are the things that come out of me — words, actions, attitudes — things that Jesus would claim for Himself?" Put another way, do our words, our actions and our attitudes reflect the purity and perfection of Christ Himself?

Let me explain: Some of the false beliefs and false teachers — the things that God has NOT planted — are easy to identify: false religions and those who teach that, in other words, those who support and teach a god (or gods) who do not exist. Solomon had shared God's view of that group: *Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain — Solomon, Psalm 127:1a*. All those efforts are meaningless. And what's more, as God said through Isaiah: *"I am the first and I am the last; apart from Me there is no God" — God speaking, Isaiah 44:6b*. Especially for those of us who have been claimed by God through Jesus Christ, that's all some pretty obvious stuff.

But there's more to it than that. This also means beliefs and teachers that support ideas that, while not false religions, still stand in complete, direct opposition to Biblical Christianity. Why? Because they are built outside that parameter of the truth of God's word and the truth of God's Son. So, for example, abortion rights — no. Same-sex marriage? No. Physician-assisted suicide (euthanasia) (which is legal in 10 US states and the District of Columbia) — no. Not only are all of these outside Biblical teachings, but they make their stand on perhaps the greatest false teaching of all; A.W. Tozer spoke so eloquently about this: *"The vague and tenuous hope that God is too kind to punish the ungodly has become a deadly opiate for the consciences of millions"* — A.W. Tozer. Or to put it simply, a God of love would never send somebody to hell. No. That and all such teachings again speak to a god that does not exist. God will pull those plants up by the roots as well.

But then it goes even further — to us and our beliefs and our practices. It's an old saying but still a good one: Do we practice what we preach? Do we reflect a real God, or do our actions and attitudes reflect a god that doesn't really exist — a false god? Remember where we started this morning: "Speaking the truth in love." Truth is unbending, unyielding. But we can still deliver the message that God has given us, that Jesus demonstrated to us, and do it with love. If our reactions to the culture around us stops with our anger, then we are declaring our allegiance to a false god — a god that never existed — because we are reacting in a way contrary to what Jesus did. Jesus reacted with both truth and love — because that reflected His Father.

Think of it like this: Would my thoughts and attitudes toward somebody, would my actions toward somebody, be reactions that Jesus would come alongside me to say, "That's exactly how I would have done it; that's exactly what I would have said — well done"? Is that what we do as Christians? We cannot address our culture by stopping with our anger. That is a false faith, a religion based on a god who doesn't exist. We must continue to minister to our culture by praying for our culture, and by stepping into our culture to present the gospel where and when we can. We must not only proclaim the truth of the gospel but reflect by our lives the genuine truth of both God's word and God's Son, Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

Our Heavenly Father demands purity. His Son showed us what that looks like. Now we are called to proceed out into the world representing that Father and that Son with their purity. No problem, right?

No — huge problem. But that's why we pray for forgiveness. That's why we confess, "I was wrong." That's why we pray for continual, ongoing surrender to our lives, that God's Holy Spirit would continue to mold us and make us into the image of His perfect Son.

A question as we close: Are we becoming more the image of God's Son? Or to put it another way, how has God changed us — this week, this month, this year? How are we becoming different than we were before? That's why we do church and Bible studies and devotions — to have God change us from who we are to who He needs us to be. That's God's desire. Is it ours? Let's pray!