



## WHAT IS CLEAN AND WHAT DEFILES

Catalog No. 1121  
 Mark 7:1-23  
 20th Message  
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 May 16th, 1999

This spring I went to see my favorite musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*. The leading character, Tevya, opens with the well known song, "Tradition." He sings: "Because of our tradition, every man knows who he is and what God expects of him. But you ask, where did our tradition get started? I'll tell you. I don't know." But then he adds, "Without our tradition, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof!"

The play was adapted from the short stories of the beloved Jewish writer Shalom Aleichem. It is the story of the responses of a father's heart when time honored traditions are torn apart in the midst of a rapidly changing and violent world. Tevya's pain is focused in his three daughters, each of whom in turn severs the sacred bonds of tradition in her choice of a mate, each more grievously than the one who preceded her. To me, the musical's most poignant scene is when Tevya is sitting next to his daughter Hodal while they wait for the train that will transport her to Siberia to marry a man who is in prison for his revolutionary ideas. Shrouded in silence, unable to speak, Tevya stares out into the bleak cold. But every parent can read his heart: "O little Hodal, where will you find shelter in Siberia's snow?"

As we are caught in laughter and swallowed in tears, the question seizes us by the throat: Where do we draw the line to preserve our sacred identity in the midst of an immoral world? This is every parent's dilemma. Which traditions are negotiable and which are not?

At no time in history was this question more fervently addressed than in Israel in the centuries prior to the coming of Christ. In 586 B.C. the Jews had lost their land, temple, festivals and king. Only one thing remained to preserve their national identity: the Torah. To safeguard it the rabbis built a fence around it, codifying countless oral traditions. They were trying to establish clear boundary markers in an effort to preserve their shaky identity, so that, in the words of Tevya, "Every man would know who he was and what God expected of him." During the Maccabean period many Jews chose death at the hands of the Romans rather than forsake these traditions.

In Mark's gospel, however, we find a popular, revolutionary rabbi from Galilee apparently ignoring all these traditions, creating no little controversy in Jerusalem.

### I. The Challenge of Tradition (7:1-5)

**And the Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered together around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from**

**the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves [lit. 'they were baptized']; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing [lit. 'baptizing'] of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" (NASB)**

We have already witnessed some amazing miracles in Mark's account. Bread from heaven and footsteps on the sea both re-enacted Isaiah's prophetic announcement of Israel's new exodus from exile. But we also have seen that the disciples of Jesus were slow to enter into and grasp this fully because, like Israel of old, their hearts were hardened. Finally, after a little re-education through the faith of the crowd they eat from the "miraculous" loaves they had been carrying around for days. Yes, the disciples are finally making spiritual progress; but sadly, the joy is short lived.

Some official representatives from Jerusalem arrive and for the second time in Mark's account (cf. 3:22) douse the joy, this time by challenging the ritual purity of the act. The disciples had not washed their hands properly, they charged. They had eaten the loaves with "impure" hands.<sup>1</sup> In the Hebrew Scriptures the term "impure" was used for what was common as opposed to what was "holy." "Impure," therefore, meant "ritually unclean" (1 Sam 21:4-5). Their challenge provokes a head-on collision with Jesus over the issue of what constitutes "clean" and "unclean."

Mark lists four characteristics (each of which is repeated for emphasis) which drive these traditionalists. First, they take great pride not in what they do, but in what they don't do. Twice we find the phrase "they do not eat unless..." This is the tell-tale mark of a traditionalist.

Second, Mark says that the source of their concern was not the Scriptures but the "tradition of the elders." He is referring to the body of Jewish oral tradition (containing detailed instructions about washing) which was later codified and set up as the "fence for (preserving the integrity of) the Torah."<sup>2</sup> And, as Edersheim points out, "It was reserved for Hillel and Shammai, the two great rival teachers and heroes of Jewish traditionalism, immediately before Christ, to fix the Rabbinic ordinance about the washing of hands (*Netilath Yadayim*). This was one of the few points on which they were agreed, and hence emphatically, 'a tradition of the Elders.'"<sup>3</sup>

Third, we are told of their passion. The term "observing" (vs. 3-4) is a rather weak translation of the Greek verb *krateo*, meaning, to "take hold of," "grasp," "seize forcibly," or to "hold fast" so as to prevent someone from escaping, or to be closely united with someone or something. These leaders took their tradition seriously and held on to

it tenaciously.

Finally, Mark describes the breadth of their application. They applied these ordinances with meticulous care. Not only were they careful to dip their wrists carefully,<sup>4</sup> but they also “baptized” every utensil in the kitchen. How ironic. While John the Baptist was occupied “baptizing” people, inaugurating the “new age,” the scribes were still focused on “baptizing” pots. These religious leaders were as meticulous in washing prior to eating as today’s surgeons are prior to surgery. Such was their drive that whenever they emerged from the “unclean” market place they vigorously cleansed themselves of everything they had come in contact with. What a contrast is Jesus, who heads straight into the market place and “cleanses” everything he comes into contact with (Mark 6:56).

So how will Jesus defend his disciples against this impassioned charge of impurity?

## II. The Tragedy of Tradition (7:6-13)

### A. Counterattack in Principle (7:6-8)

**And He said to them, “[Beautifully] did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,  
‘This people honors Me with their lips,  
But their heart is far away from Me.  
But in vain do they worship Me,  
Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’  
Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”**

Jesus doesn’t defend his disciples against the charge. Rather, he takes the offensive, puts his accusers on the stand and charges them with a more serious offense. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, he says, “Beautifully did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites.” Jesus is not interested in making friends. As Rikki Watts points out: “Isaiah 29 belongs to that series of utterances in chapters 28-31 which... constitute the book’s most sustained attack on the nation’s leaders”<sup>5</sup> who, because of their blatant disobedience, would be exiled.

Jesus shocks them with the pronouncement that the once historic “they” has now become “you.” He says, in effect, “You hypocrites, your tradition is evil on three counts.” First, tradition may give the appearance of a zealous life, but in reality it veils a hard heart. Religious people can be the most hard hearted souls on earth. They can be absolutely bereft of the tenderness that marks an authentic relationship with God.

The second indictment, in fact the one that spurred the Reformation, is that elevating human tradition to what is sacred places man on equal footing with God as the source of revelation. This crime has severe consequences (Deut 4:2; 12:32; Rev 22:18). This verse strikes a death blow to every Christian cult whose founders make their own writings equal to the revelation of the New Testament.

And third, once man occupies that same prestigious chair as God, tradition and Scripture will inevitably come into conflict. That is when man casts aside God’s commandments in favor of his traditions, and God is deposed from his rightful place.

Before his accusers can recover from the shock of these charges, Jesus follows with a stinging illustration.

### B. Counter-attack Illustrated (7:9-13)

**He was also saying to them, “[Beautifully] you set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death’; but you say, ‘If a man says to his father or his mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by is Corban (that is to say, given to God),’ you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that. “**

Once again Jesus opens with the sarcastic, “Beautifully”: “Beautifully you set aside the commandment in order to keep your tradition.” The point is well illustrated when their tradition of designating gifts to God comes into conflict with the fourth commandment, to honor one’s parents. To grant honor to someone meant to give him “social weight in the community” (Bruce Waltke). The primary way children demonstrated honor to their parents was by providing financially for them in their old age. Thus, the children returned to their elderly parents the same care which the parents provided them at birth—feeding, clothing and nurturing them. This is the supreme privilege and responsibility of children. “Honoring parents” also meant safeguarding their reputation against any slanderous word or abusive speech which might injure them emotionally. Children uniquely carry the memory of their parents’ shortcomings. They have an unlimited arsenal of stinging missiles which, if launched, can cause great emotional pain. We are never to arm those missiles, though we may be tempted to do so.

Now with just a little tradition of their own, these leaders have managed to set aside the entire weight of the fourth commandment. All that was required was for an individual to place the label “corban” on his financial assets. Cranfield explains that this term “is derived from the verb ‘to bring near’ and denotes an offering made to God... That which is offered to God as a *corban* becomes ‘holy’ and so is no longer available for ordinary use... It did not always mean that the thing concerned had actually to be offered; rather, that it was withdrawn from its originally intended use and was no longer available for a particular person or persons.”<sup>6</sup> By means of this tradition children could turn their backs on their needy parents, using a holy veneer to escape their duty to them.

Jesus says the consequences of this would be serious. Though it may be difficult for our generation to comprehend, this commandment was so important to God that he sanctioned the death penalty for its violation. By mentioning the death penalty Jesus is really raising the stakes, and perhaps foreshadowing the terrible destiny of that generation (Mark 13).<sup>7</sup> And, by contrast, we feel the terrible irony that Jesus, who upholds the commandment, will be put to death at the hands of these leaders. Yet, even in that dark hour he will make provision for his mother (John 19:26-27).

If one illustration were not enough, Jesus seals his case by saying, in effect, “This isn’t the only example I could quote. You do many things such as this.” His accusers are condemned to silence. But since they were the ones who had raised the issue of cleanliness and defilement, Jesus now summons the crowd and instructs them by means of

a parable. Here we will discover a radical new development which Jesus is instituting with the New Covenant.

### III. The True Source of Defilement (7:14-23)

#### A. A Parable Addressed to the Crowd (7:14-16)

**And summoning the multitude again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. If any man has ears to hear, let him hear."<sup>8</sup>**

The importance of what he is about to say, as well as its difficulty to comprehend, is foreshadowed by the words, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand." Only those who take the time, with humble hearts and active minds, to meditate on the cryptic parable will penetrate its meaning, for there is more here than meets the eye of the casual observer. It is only for the one "who has ears to hear" ("hearing" implies obedience to the radical revelation).

#### B. The Parable Explained to the Disciples (7:17-23)

**And when leaving the multitude, He had entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. And He said to them, "Are you too so uncomprehending? Do you not see that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? " (Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."**

Now we see where this issue of purity and cleanliness is leading. What began over a dispute about handwashing, and escalated to an attack on tradition over Scripture, now finds its climax in defining the real issue of what constitutes cleanliness. Purity, says Jesus, is not defined by what one eats, but what issues from the heart. In the market place the danger is not what you take in and eat; it's what issues from your own heart; that is what will defile you. "Heart" is the key term in the text (vv 6, 19, 21). Nothing which goes into a man from the outside can defile him, since it doesn't touch the heart, but enters the belly and is eliminated (literally: "passes into the latrine").

To make sure his readers do not miss the implication of all of this, Mark adds his revolutionary conclusion, "All foods are now cleansed." Now we know the reason for the parable. Jesus could not have stated this categorically and openly among the crowds, because doing so would have provoked a riot. Here he is not merely undoing human tradition invented to safeguard Scripture; now he has placed himself in the position of nullifying tradition which came *from* Scripture. He has just undone fourteen hundred years of the tradition of Israel's dietary laws! But it was these very laws which set Israel apart from the nations. During the exile they became "one of the most cherished cultural boundary-markers of Israel, a social and religious symbol which people in recent memory had adhered to even when the result was torture and death" (2 Macc 6.18-31; 7:1-42).<sup>9</sup>

So the question now is: How can Jesus sweep away thousands of years of Biblical tradition that clearly defined Israel? The answer is that he did not come to nullify the law but to fulfill it, by inaugurating a covenant renewal that would place God's law in the hearts of his people. As Moses wrote, "Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live...Then you shall again obey the Lord, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today" (Deut 30:6-10). The same promise was reiterated by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who spoke of a new day when God's law would be written on the heart (Jer 31:33; 32:38-40; Ezek 36:26-27). And when that day arrived all ceremonial and cultic aspects of the law would give way to "reality" (Jer 3:16).<sup>10</sup>

And yet it is a very radical claim, as Tom Wright explains:

Jesus was claiming that this one God was redefining Israel around himself and his kingdom-proclamation; that, as part of that work, the purity to which Torah pointed would be achieved by the prophet's dream of a cleansed heart; and that, as a result, the traditions which attempted to bolster Israel's national identity were out of date and out of line.<sup>11</sup>

Thus with clean hearts there would be no necessity for dietary laws which at best only symbolized their purity, and pointed to the One pure loaf which Israel would one day feed upon directly. Now that he has come, what defines us as the people of God is not cultic ritual but the state of our hearts. It is supremely a matter of the heart, a heart on which the Spirit has written the Ten Commandments, empowering us to love God and our neighbor with the whole heart (2 Cor 3:3-6). The great tragedy about Israel's passion for tradition was that it blinded them to the present hour of their liberation of covenant renewal and paralyzed them in their desperate uncleanness.

So where do we draw the line so as to preserve our sacred identity in the midst of an ever changing world? What traditions do we preserve? Let me conclude with four observations from the early church's application of this theme of purity in the New Covenant.

### IV. Feeding on New Covenant Renewal

#### A. Focus Is On the Heart

Whenever the apostles speak of purity in the New Testament the issue is never one of cultic ritual, diet or washings; it is solely one of the heart. As we enter the market place the greatest danger to our purity comes from our own greedy hearts which consume malicious idols. As the author of Hebrews writes, "let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our *hearts* sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:22). This frame of mind ought to give Christians a very humble demeanor. We are our own worst enemy.

#### B. Relationships Take Precedence Over Food

Secondly, whenever a question arose about purity and food, the apostles responded that relationships always took precedence over food. This explains the somewhat

cryptic verse in Paul's letter to Timothy to "to take a little wine for the stomach and your frequent ailments" (1 Tim 5:23). At first glance the verse seems utterly out of context, since Paul is writing about the ordination of elders. But the larger issue is purity. In order to maintain purity as an elder, Timothy had begun to abstain from wine. But the impure water supply of that society was taking a great toll on his weak digestive system. Paul's answer is that it is far more important for the purity of the church as to whom you lay hands on as an elder, than what you drink. A little wine will do you no harm; an impure elder will destroy you.

The same governing principle applied to abstaining from certain food or drink. Although Paul was free to eat meat, even that which had been sacrificed to idols, he would gladly abstain in the presence of a weaker brother if it damaged his faith. Again, pure relationships meant everything; food meant nothing: "...for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17).

### C. Responsibility Takes Precedence Over Devotion

In the church today there is a driving concern for the number of people being set aside to full time Christian work as a sign of success. The apostles were far more concerned with ethical purity within the church, however. The early church had a large population of widows which the church subsidized, receiving in return the benefits of their "full time" service and devotion. But Paul warned Timothy to not place on the list a widow with surviving children. To the apostle it was more important to fulfill the fourth commandment, that children honor their parents, than to get more full time workers for the church. "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8). Ethical responsibility is more important than religious service.

If Paul were writing to believers in Silicon Valley, I imagine he might address the issue of purity in regard to our finances. Many people in this valley are heavily in debt—and I am not speaking of a mortgage payment, which is an investment in an appreciating asset. Rather, I am speaking of debt for goods and services already received and paid for not with money but with a credit card. The debts have mounted and so has the interest. In light of that, how can anyone come to church and give a tithe to show devotion to God when the money isn't his? As Christians, I believe we ought to give the first and best, demonstrating our dependence on God, that he is the "giver of all things." We are to give generously, even "out of our poverty." But we can't give what we don't have. If we have made a bad choice in the past and are in debt to the world, let us first pay off our debts; then we will be free to offer our time and finances to the Lord. Ethical purity comes first, then religious service.

### D. The Real Danger to Purity: Affections of the Heart

Because renewed hearts are now indeed the hallmark of God's people, the apostles said that when we are ready to enter into lifetime relational commitments that involve our affections of the heart, we must never compromise. The heart must be safeguarded against rival affections that might lead it into idolatry. This is fundamental to our purity. So Paul writes, "Do not be [unequally yoked] with unbelievers, for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever...Let us *cleanse* ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor 6:14-15; 7:1). For one person that may be a dating or marriage relationship with an unbeliever; for another it may be a certain kind of work environment that evokes all the wrong affections. There must be no compromise here.

We are a new covenant people, free, and laden with no cultic burden. The only hallmark remaining is a heart that loves God and keeps his commandments. How great a tragedy it would be if that one distinctive watermark were lost. It would be a greater tragedy by far than the traditions of the Jews.

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1. The word really means "common" and is the theme word for our text. Its noun and related verb "to make common" or "defile" are used six times (vv 2, 5, 15, 18, 20, 23).
2. C. E. B. Cranfield (*The Gospel According to St Mark* [Cambridge University Press, 1959] 233) points this out with reference to Josephus, *Ant.* 13. 297.
3. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) Bk. 3, ch. 31, pg. 13.
4. The word in the NASB text translated "carefully" (NIV: "ceremonial") most likely means "with a fist," as Cranfield, 233, observes: "different sorts of ritual washing were required for different degrees of impurity. In the Talmud a distinction is made between 'dipping up to the wrist', which is a minor ablution, and the more serious 'plunging up to the wrist', for which a large quantity of water was required."
5. Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 213-214.
6. Cranfield, 237
7. Rikki Watts, 218, makes the very interesting suggestion that Jesus' choice of this commandment is appropriate because it is the first commandment with a promise to live long in the land (Ex 20:12; Deut 5:16). Now its rejection by these leaders will sanction "destruction and exile from the land".
8. The best mss. omit this verse. "It appears to be a scribal gloss (derived perhaps from 4:9 or 4:23), introduced as an appropriate sequel to ver. 14" pgs. 94,95 Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971) 94-95.
9. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 179.
10. "And it shall be in those days...they shall say no more, 'The ark of the covenant of the Lord.' And it shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they miss it, nor shall it be made again" (Jer 3:16).
11. Wright, 398.