Mark Lesson 21 (2022)

**JESUS CHALLENGES JEWISH TRADITIONS**

(Create In Me A Clean Heart)

Mark 7:1-21

Key Verse: 7:15

“Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

Jesus’ popularity in Israel has been skyrocketing, and so was the opposition from the Jewish religious leaders. His confrontation with Jewish religious leaders in today’s passage confirms that his new teaching was completely different from that of the Jewish religious traditions. These two could not get along harmoniously, no matter what. Why not? It’s because, as Jesus mentioned earlier, the new wine should not be poured into old wineskins. It should be poured into new wineskins (2:22). After confronting the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus seriously warned the crowd and his disciples against Jewish religious traditions and invited them to examine their hearts carefully. This morning, let’s think about why the change of the heart is so significant and how we can do it.

Look at verses 1-2. “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.” It’s the second time Mark records a delegation sent from Jerusalem (3:22). It is evident that they came to investigate Jesus, trying to find physical evidence to accuse him of breaking Jewish laws. I am sure they carefully inspect every move of Jesus and his disciples (pic#1). Then, they noticed that some of his disciples failed to follow the Jewish hand-washing ritual before eating (pic#2).

Since the primary readers of Mark’s Gospel were non-Jewish, the author Mark inserted the background information behind the Jewish hand washing ritual in verses 3-4. “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.).” During the pandemic, wearing a face covering or mask was mandatory. Everyone made sure to wash their hands with soap or hand sanitizers. It was for hygiene to prevent any contamination. But the Jewish handwashing ritual had nothing to do with hygiene. It was a religious tradition that had been built for hundreds of years. According to the Jewish tradition, they must be ceremonially clean by washing their hands when they get ready to eat. The handwashing ritual started with the priests. The priests were commanded to wash their hands before ministering in the temple. It was to remind them to have a clean heart before God. It was about the purification of the heart, not just hands.

So, sometimes along the way, some pious Jewish ancestors suggested, “*If it’s good for the priests, it would be beneficial for the ordinary people. So why don’t we let them do that too.”* More and more details were added. They cleaned not just their hands but also their cups, pitchers, and kettles. It became their tradition. How nice it was to remind the importance of heart purification. Yet, the problem was that the notion that they had to be clean in their heart was lost, and they became preoccupied with having clean hands. The hand washing ritual was just one of many Jewish ceremonial washing rituals. It came to the point that if anyone did not follow these traditions, they were considered unclean, which meant unacceptable and even offensive to God. The practice has taken the place of absolute authority equal to or even above God’s words.

Look at verse 5. “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?’” They asked Jesus for an explanation for his disciples’ misconduct because they considered him responsible. They suspected that the disciples’ failure to wash indicated Jesus’ disregard for the traditions of the elders. It was pressuring him to follow their authority. Otherwise, he would expect the consequences of not confirming their practices, which include condemnation, ex-communication, and even death.

How did Jesus answer their question? Jesus didn’t compromise with them by admitting that his disciples’ conduct was ignorant, wrong, and a mistake. Instead, he challenged the source of their religious authority. He was courageous and unafraid to face the consequences.

What did he say to them? Look at verses 6 and 7. “He replied, ‘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.’” Jesus’ words to the religious leaders seem harsh and undiplomatic. He didn’t mince the words. Jesus confronted them by pointing out their hypocrisy with the quotation of Isaiah 29:13, by which the Prophet Isaiah challenged the hypocrisy of Jewish religion in his time before their exile to Babylon.

The word “hypocrisy” means “to act or pretend.” Jesus called the Jewish religious leaders hypocrites because they pretended to be godly and pious when they were not. In some sense, we all are hypocritical because of the discrepancy between our words and behaviors. We don’t mean to be deceitful, but sometimes, we cannot avoid being contradictory. We all make mistakes due to our fallen nature and circumstances. We failed to keep our promises. Of course, there is no good excuse for our contradicting words and behaviors. We must admit our failures and ask for God’s mercy.

Yet, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were not just making a mistake. They were deceitful by putting on a mask of holiness and righteousness to cover up their real selves. The issue that Jesus pointed out here isn’t their evil thoughts and behaviors but their pretension, the disguise of their true selves. They were not honest with themselves, others, and God. That’s the hypocrisy that Jesus was talking about.

In verses 8-13, Jesus pointed out why blindly following human/religious traditions is a serious mistake. Read verses 8 and 9. “‘You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.’ And he continued, ‘You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of god to observe your traditions!’” Jesus distinguished between God’s commands and human/religious traditions in these verses. Jesus used the term “human traditions” at least four times in this passage.

We follow many traditions, like national traditions handed down from generation to generation. We keep family traditions and various ways of observing holidays. We also follow church/religious traditions, incorporating certain symbols, phrases, and words. Following the tradition is not bad at all. However, it has its place and limitation. When our human tradition becomes an absolute rule, taking the position of the authority of God’s words, it’s unhealthy and not beneficial for our spiritual growth.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were overzealous of the religious traditions made by their ancestors. They became uptight about their practices and blind to God’s ever-renewing work among them. That’s why Jesus rejected the authority of the tradition of the elders. No matter how wonderful they might be, the traditions of the elders were no longer helpful and relevant to them. Yet, the religious leaders insisted that they should keep them as if they were absolute. They were the ones who were disobedient to God, not Jesus or his disciples. Many UBF members pray, “May God establish America as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” It sounds like a good prayer topic. However, we know it’s not biblically and theologically inaccurate. But some of us keep following this tradition.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law had a skillful way of setting aside God’s commands to observe their tradition. In verses 10-13, Jesus gives them a good example. Look at verses 10-13. “For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ But you say that if anyone declares that what they 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.’” The Pharisees and teachers of the law claimed that they honored Moses, who commanded them to honor their father and mother. Indeed, honoring parents means more than lip service. It includes financial support and practical care if necessary.

The word “corban” means “a gift devoted to God.” Jewish tradition allowed people to declare something they owned as “corban,” dedicated to God. Since it was dedicated to God, nobody can touch it, not even parents. Even though it does not mean that “corban” should be given to the priests, it allowed people to get away from their primary obligation to support their parents, even needy parents. Jesus said that the Pharisees did many things like that (13). I think we also do similar things, even unintentionally, due to our ignorance

As a young Christian, I thought my calling for world campus evangelism was the first important thing in my life. I unintentionally neglected my primary obligation to my old parents, believing God would take care of them. So, in my obedience to God’s call to World Campus Evangelism, I married my wife Joy and came to the US in 1981. When my kids were born, I was too preoccupied with my ministry as a missionary. So I didn’t pay enough attention to them, believing that if I served God’s ministry first, God would take care of them. I am thankful for God’s mercy on my children. However, I am aware that my negligence caused many problems for my children and my parents. My greatest regret is that I didn’t honor my parents and care for my children when they needed my support. It often hurts me. I also know that I cannot blame anybody for my own mistakes.

Honestly, I was too ambitious. My ambition misled me. Instead of obeying God’s command of love genuinely, I tend to follow human traditions. Now I realize that God’s command of love for our parents, children, and humans in need cannot be replaced by any human or religious traditions and slogan. It’s just not right. I’ve made some progress and still have a long way to grow.

In the following verses, Jesus resumes the issue of defilement. Let’s read verses 14-16. “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.’” According to the footnote, some old manuscripts include the words of 4:23 in verse 16, “If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.” But there is no verse 16 in the NIV. But it addresses the issue. Jesus urged his audience to listen very attentively. He addressed the general principle of clean and unclean in verse 15. The New Living Translation is easier to understand, “It’s not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart.” Food does not make us unclean, but our thoughts do. The Jews didn’t eat particular food which considered unclean. According to the comments in verse 19, “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.”

Of course, Jesus was speaking morally and spiritually, not medically or physiologically. He was trying to help people pay attention to their hearts’ condition rather than keeping Jewish ceremonial rituals or dietary rules. I am not sure if the crowd of people understood what Jesus was talking about.

Look at verses 17 and 18. “After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ‘Are you so dull?’ he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it does not go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of their body.’ (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.).” At this point, we find that the disciples’ level of spiritual understanding wasn’t any better than that of the crowd. Yet, there was a difference. What’s the difference? The disciples didn’t pretend to know when they didn't understand. They asked questions. They were humble, honest, and inquisitive, like little children. The primary quality of children is their honesty, curiosity, and questioning. Jesus said that this kind of childlike character is essential for entering the kingdom of God (Mt. 18:3).

In verses 20-23, Jesus’ explanation became more specific. Let’s read verses 20-23. “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 thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.’” In these verses, Jesus emphasizes the importance of awareness of the heart condition instead of the religious outlook. Apostle Paul also mentioned a similar thing when he said to the Christians in Rome, “For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by the Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praisefrom God, not from people.” (Ro. 2:28-29: NLT)

Both Jesus and Apostle address the importance of our heart condition as opposed to the religious traditions. Proverbs 4:23 states, “Above all else, guard your hearts, for everything you do flows from it.” (NIV) Jeremiah 17:9 also states, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? Modern phycology and neuroscience confirm these biblical statements that the human heart is the core of human existence, which consists of emotion and cognition. However, Jeremiah’s statement about our hearts is somewhat negative. I think it’s because he was lamenting the nasty side of the human heart. He said that our hearts are deceitful and beyond cure. But if it’s beyond cure, we have no hope of the restoration and transformation of our lives, which is the core of God’s salvation.

Jesus sees great potential in the human heart despite its vulnerability. The human heart is the wellspring of human life. Our life’s happiness depends on how we manage our hearts. Just fulfilling religious duties, like attending Sunday services, reciting the Lord’s Prayer or the Apostles Creed, singing hymns, receiving the baptism of water, or even memorizing Bible verses, would not automatically promote the well-being of our souls. The sins mentioned in verses 21 and 22 include unhealthy feelings, desires, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. But all of them come from within our hearts. Therefore, the core of our healthy spirituality is managing our heart conditions. In other words, our hearts must be cleansed, well-maintained, and transformed.

How do we do it? Even though Jesus didn’t mention it yet, the blood of Christ can cleanse us from our sins and change our hearts. Hebrews 9:13-14 (NLT) states, “Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer could cleanse people’s bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins.” The efficacy of Christ’s blood is amazing. But that’s not the end. We are frustrated because even though we believe we are born-again Christians, we find ourselves unchanged. Why is it so? It’s not because Christ’s blood is not adequate. Transformation is not automatic, and we often ignore and neglect the process.

Psalm 139:23-24 states, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” The psalmist seems to acknowledge the difference between feelings and cognitions for he says, “know my heart!” and “know my thoughts!” He brought himself into the presence of God so that his evil and unhealthy thoughts and hidden grievances could be detected, and he may be led to the light of God’s healing touch.

Carl G. Jung, a Swiss medical doctor (psychiatrist) and psychoanalyst said, *“Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct (control) your life, and you will call it fate.”* His statement seems to resonate with the Biblical view and Jesus’ teaching. I believe God’s grace through the blood shed on the cross is adequate. We can become a new creation through the blood of Christ. But we need to look into ourselves deeper so that God’s grace may not remain on the surface but go deeper and deeper into our hearts and souls. It’s the core of the spirituality that Jesus wants us to know, the change of our hearts through deep searching and the blood of Christ.