

The uselessness of religion

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 July 2025

Preacher: Phil Martin

[0 : 00] Mark chapter 7, beginning at verse 1, on page 1016 of the Church Bible. Now when the Pharisees gathered to him with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash.

And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches. And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?

And he said to them, well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.

[1 : 31] And he said to them, you have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition. For Moses said, honour your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.

But you say, if a man tells his father or his mother, whatever you would have gained from me is korban, that is given to God, then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down, and many such things you do.

And he called the people to him again and said to them, hear me, all of you, and understand, there is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him.

But the things that come out of a person are what defile him. And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable.

And he said to them, then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart, but his stomach, and is expelled?

[3 : 11] Thus he declared all foods clean. And he said, what comes out of a person is what defiles him.

For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. Thanks, Estee. I think we can be thankful for the cooler conditions this week.

Last week was like being in a jungle hot room, wasn't it? One of those rooms where you grow palm trees and that kind of thing. But nice and cool today. Let me pray again as we begin.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you very much for this chance to come to your word. And we thank you that your word is like a two-edged sword and that never returns to you empty.

[4 : 29] And we pray that you would work in each one of us now through your word by your spirit. We long to know you better. We long to walk more closely with the Lord Jesus.

And we ask these things in his name. Amen. Well, so we come to chapter 7 in Mark's gospel.

And I just wanted briefly, as we begin, just to point out what I think is happening through this whole section of Mark from chapters 4 to 8. It's a section that works together.

And I don't know if you know those dimmer lights. Well, you will know those dimmer lights. That you can turn on the brightness. Turn up the brightness. And I think what's happening in this section is that Jesus is turning up the brightness of his identity and his work.

So we saw a few weeks ago the greatness of his power to save, even from death. But as he turns up the brightness on his own identity and work, that also begins to expose us and the darkness of who we really are.

[5 : 45] And so what you get is, you get revelation of himself, chapter 4 and 5, exposure of us, Herod. Revelation of himself, even more, chapter 6, with the feeding of the 5,000 and his identity as God and shepherd.

And now, exposure of us. And there are two things that Jesus exposes in this passage. Number one, the truth about religion. And number two, the truth about us. He cuts to the heart of who we are. And he leaves us exposed.

I want to begin by asking us to imagine something. It's not a happy picture. But it does, I think, get to the heart of what the Lord Jesus is doing here for all of us as we read his words in chapter 7.

I want you to imagine someone with leprosy. You would have seen pictures. Leprosy all over the body. Incurable in Jesus' day.

[6 : 54] But often bandages would be wrapped round. Imagine this person wrapped head to toe in bandages. Now, the bandage has no power to heal the disease.

It simply covers it over. The bandage that we all put over ourselves in one way or another, spiritually, is called religion.

Man-made traditions. Whole bodies of thought and of practice. World religions. And through these words, it is as if Jesus, like a good doctor, gently takes the bandage off and says, it's useless. And leaves us exposed to our true state underneath our true disease. Look down at verse 21. Now, he does that not so that we would despair, but so that we would realize that what we need is not religion, but him, our God and shepherd.

That's where we're going today. You may have heard that Christianity is not about coming to a religion, but it's about coming to a person. Well, that is true. And that's what chapter 7 in Mark's gospel is for.

[8 : 29] Two things that Jesus exposes here, the truth about religion, the truth about ourselves, so that we come to him. Well, let's start with the truth about our religions that we make up for ourselves.

I don't know if anyone remembers the advert from the 90s. This is a slightly generational thing, but I think maybe in this room, we'd have a majority. The advert from the 90s, Ron Sill, does exactly what it says on the tin.

No. There's a few knobs. There's a few knobs. Ron Sill does exactly what it says on the tin, and it was some kind of paint. I don't even know what it was, but apparently it did what it said on the tin. Now, this chapter, religion does exactly the opposite of what it says on the tin. Religion says, do this and honor God, but it does the opposite.

Look at verse 6. Jesus says to these Jews of his day, well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

[9 : 50] In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.

And he said to them, you have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition. Now, this is massive.

the Jewish Messiah came and declared that the Judaism of his day was pure spiritual hypocrisy. There's no difference really between the Judaism of Jesus' day and the Judaism today. The point is not to single out one religion.

If Judaism was hypocrisy, is hypocrisy, well, Judaism's traditions flow at least from the word of God, the scriptures, well then every and any man-made religion that is not the word of God, the Bible, is the same.

[10 : 56] Notice in verse 9, this was new to me this time, verse 9, Jesus says, you have a fine way of rejecting the word of God.

That word, fine, is the normal word for well, splendidly, appropriately, usually used in that way, a positive way.

Jesus says, how splendidly, how well you have found a way to reject God's word. it seems as though he's being sarcastic.

What an impressive way you have invented to reject God. It looks so right, so godly, so holy on the outside.

But actually, religions provide a clever way to reject God's word. How can Jesus say that about Judaism? Well, he gives this example in verse 10.

[11 : 57] Just look with me at verse 10. For Moses said, honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die. But you say, if a man tells his father or mother, whatever you would have gained from me is Corban, that is given to God.

What's going on here? Well, verse 10, Moses said, in other words, that was the word of God says that. One of the commandments, honor your father and your mother.

But you say, in other words, they developed this tradition of Corban. Now, this tradition of Corban was the practice that somebody could declare their possessions devoted to God and carry on using them themselves, looking very sincere about God while neglecting to love and support their parents with them.

Oh, this is Corban, all this stuff of mine. I'm afraid I can't give it to you. It's devoted to God. Well, this is a perfectly chosen example to illustrate his point.

Verse 6, this people honors me with their lips. How good that sounds, doesn't it, Corban? It's devoted to God. You can imagine the people talking about these wonderful traditions that build on and improve the word of God and complement it.

[13 : 26] But it rides roughshod over what God had actually said in the Bible. Look at what Jesus says in verse 12. Then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down, and many such things you do.

A fine-looking, sophisticated, refined, respectable, but thin cover for rejecting God and his word. This is true of every religion that we make up for ourselves. I've got my Quran here, Surah 4. Let me just read it.

O people of the Scripture, do not exaggerate your religion nor utter anything concerning Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah and his word which he conveyed to Mary and a spirit from him.

So, believe in Allah and his messengers and say not three. It is better for you. Allah is only one God far as it removed from his transcendent majesty that he should have a son.

[14 : 46] What a fine-looking, fine-sounding way. Sounds so God-honoring to reject the word of God, the gospel. I've got this book here, called Living Buddha, Living Christ, that was given to me.

It says this. It says, our true home is the present moment. The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth in the present moment.

It's not a matter of faith. It's a matter of practice. We need to bring our body and mind into the present moment and we will touch what is refreshing, what is healing and wondrous.

And he talks about touching the Holy Spirit. You know, it sounds great. lots of good-sounding words, but it's a fine way to reject the word of God about his son being the Christ, the Messiah, and faith in him being the way we find life.

Sometimes we can even find this within what is called so-called Christianity. Orthodox Church, for example, looks so good, so much about it that seems so good.

[16 : 04] But I was chatting to someone the other day who said in his branch of the Orthodox Church, they say, you must be baptized into this church, into this denomination, this Orthodox denomination.

Otherwise, you cannot be sure of your salvation. But what a fine-looking way to reject the gospel where we find that it is faith in Christ that saves, not being baptized into a particular denomination. Why do we do it? Why do we invent these religions for ourselves? Well, the answer is that ever since Genesis 3, we've always loved to worship God on our own terms because we love to be in charge.

You see here, the issue is not that they don't believe in God. They do very much believe in God. Neither is the issue that they don't think it's important to take God seriously in some way.

Most religions do. The issue is that they have defined how God should be worshipped. not according to what he says in his word, but according to what we have decided.

[17 : 18] The sort of God we think he should be. We have therefore learned to dress up our rebellion in holy clothes of religion.

And Jesus says, fooling no one but ourselves. Think of our secular religion religion as some have described it, I think rightly.

It is respectable and sophisticated. There are strong moral values, many of which are commendable. Equality, protection of the weak, et cetera, just like the Judaism of Jesus' day. But it is a fine way to reject the gospel from which those values have come. People talk about many hundreds of man-made religions.

Which one should we follow, they say? The answer is, it doesn't matter. They're all the same. Not in the way we think, not as roads up the same mountain, but as roads away from that mountain, which is God and his word.

[18 : 35] We fool no one but ourselves, and God sees through them. the truth about religion and secondly, the truth about ourselves.

Jesus goes deeper to expose the truth about us. Verse 14, And he called the people to him again and said to them, Hear me, all of you, and understand.

Listen up. There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him. But the things that come out of a person are what defile him.

The point is this. Their religious rituals misplaced the problem. The problem was thought to be external.

And that's why the furious washing. Do you see in 7 verse 3, the Pharisees do not eat unless they wash their hands and they wash their hands, they wash their couches, they wash their pots, their copper vessels.

[19 : 43] That was to misplace the problem as being on the outside. But Jesus says, listen up. This is what we all need to grasp.

Verse 14, the problem is not out there, it's inside us. The disciples didn't understand in verse 17, so they ask him about the parable and then Jesus seems to be frustrated with them.

Then are you also without understanding? Do you not also understand? Can you not see this self-evidently obvious truth?

The food laws in the Old Testament that said don't eat certain things or touch a carcass, they were never really about externals, any more than animal sacrifices could take away sins.

The food laws were meant as a visual aid to illustrate the point that we're unclean before God by nature. They were meant to point us to the real problem.

[20 : 51] And that is why in verse 19, do you see there, Jesus declares all foods clean. They were a visual aid to tell us about the human heart.

They've served their purpose and now they are no longer necessary now that the Messiah himself is here. Verse 20, Jesus says, this is what they were pointing to.

This is what that was all about. It's not what is outside, but what comes out of a person that makes him unclean. That word defiles means to make unclean before God.

It's always been our hearts that are the problem. Now, that doesn't mean the red organ that pumps blood around our body.

That's not what Jesus is saying. We might say it's who we are on the inside that's the problem. it's the real me. I'm the problem.

[21 : 54] That's what Jesus means. It's the heart of who we are. And notice the first in that list in verse 21, evil thoughts.

It's our thoughts that make us unclean before God. You thought about that? Our thoughts are the things that make us unclean before God.

All of the rest in that list, I take it, must begin as thoughts because they come from within, from the heart. They begin as thoughts and then they become plans before they ever reach action.

And it is our thoughts that flow from our hearts that make us unfit for God's presence. That is the lustful thoughts that we indulge about someone who's not our spouse.

The discontented, greedy desire to have what someone else has coveting. The envy we feel of people on social media or in the office or at school in the sports team, this or that person receiving the toilets.

[23 : 13] The way we despise people in our thoughts before it ever reaches our mouths. Pride, the way we think so highly of ourselves more highly than others or even of God himself.

These evil thoughts make us unclean before God. and if the thoughts then of course the actions too, but they begin in our hearts.

I take it just one of these thoughts would make us unfit to be in the presence of a pure holy God for eternity.

What about ten? What about ten thousand? What about a hundred thousand? What about a lifetime? our hearts are a fountain of evil thoughts by nature.

I don't think it's difficult for us to understand this. Deep down we know it. A child can grasp it. I remember realizing at a young age asking this question, why am I so selfish always and why can I not seem to do anything about it?

[24 : 35] And religion offers a useless solution. That's Jesus' point. In contrast to their washings, religion offers an external solution to an internal problem, like the bandage over leprosy.

It offers some way to wash ourselves, like the Pharisees washing in verses 3 and 4. You find it in every single religion, every single world religion, as far as I can tell, some way to wash yourself, ritually, ritual washings.

Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, they all have the same traditions of washing, different permutations, different ways of doing it, but the same thing. Why? Well, because we know there's something wrong with us.

We know something's not quite right, we just misplaced the problem, and we misplaced the solution. the point Jesus is making is that all of this furious washing is like placing a bandage over leprosy.

And so Jesus, the good doctor, says, take the bandage off, the bandage of religion, and let me show you your real disease.

[25 : 51] Actually, it's you. It's who you are on the inside, and who I am on the inside. One day, we will all have to stand before the living God in all his holiness, fierce purity, and goodness, and his hatred of evil.

Do you know what Isaiah the prophet said when he saw a vision of God in the Old Testament? Do you know what the first thing to say he said? Three words, woe is me.

I'm a man of unclean lips, unclean lips. Well, Jesus says to each one of us here today, he wants to leave us exposed so that we too might cry out, like Isaiah, woe is me by nature.

I'm a man or woman of unclean heart. I cannot wash myself. I wonder what you think of this. it's a far cry from all the songs that we hear about how we're good on the inside and if only people knew what I was really like and let me be the real me and all of that stuff.

It's hard for us to accept this about ourselves, isn't it? But this is the frank diagnosis of Jesus about you and about me.

[27 : 22] we are not good people. We cannot stand before a holy God on judgment day, no matter how much religion we have done.

What is the point? Well, one conclusion. We must come to a person and not to a religion.

Can you see that Mark makes that clear actually in the verse before our chapter? Just look at verse 56 of chapter 6.

Wherever Jesus came in villages, cities, countryside, they lay the sick in the marketplaces and applaud him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment and as many touched it were made well.

They came to him. The woman straight after our passage in verse 25 of chapter 7, whose little daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of him and came and fell down at his feet.

[28 : 28] She came to him. Either side of this chapter, Jesus feeds the 5,000, saying he is the God and shepherd who has come to provide for the sheep.

sheep. Jesus feeds the 4,000, saying he is the God and shepherd who has come to provide for the sheep through his death. We must come to him, not to religion.

And we must come by simple faith, just as the leper did as he fell down before Jesus and said, Lord, if you will make me clean. Just as the woman did as she came in faith, bringing nothing to him, but only to receive.

And Jesus willingly gives cleansing. Remember what he said to the leper? I will be clean. Well, this is an urgent message for all people.

Judgment day is coming. Flee from religion. Come to Jesus. The only one who can heal our hearts and make us clean forever.

[29 : 45] And I just want to end with a word for those of us who have already come to Jesus. We may be asking, well, am I clean or aren't I?

These thoughts and these things still come out of our hearts, don't they, every day? They will have done today for each one of us already. I've been wrestling with this question a bit over the last

week. I think the Bible says two things to us.

The gospel says two things to us. Firstly, it says you are clean. That's what Jesus said to his disciples before he died.

You are clean, washed of all your sins. You are clean. You have been brought to God through the death of Jesus on the cross. The moment we come to Jesus, washed of all of our sins, you are clean.

Rejoice. Give thanks. that is the biggest thing I think the Bible says about it. But I think the second thing is that there is the cleansing of the loved and accepted child as we go on in life and get our feet dirty as we walk the path following the Lord Jesus every day.

[31 : 00] This stuff still comes out of our old hearts. the Lord God has given us new hearts. But this stuff still comes out of our old hearts and we need to come back again and again to the Lord Jesus. Not for the once for all cleansing that brings us from being enemies of God into his family, but for the cleansing of the child, being washed by his loving Father and his loving Lord.

Well, maybe that's something that we all need to do today again, afresh, to come to Jesus for that cleansing. Let's, a moment of quiet as we pause and think about some of these things and maybe pray in our hearts and then I'll close us.

Heavenly Father, thank you that your word uncovers us and uncovers the true state of our hearts. Thank you that you do that not to condemn us or crush us.

so that we might come to find the right solution, the only solution, that we might run away from religion and run into the arms of a person, of your son, the Lord Jesus.

Lord Jesus, we come again to you freshly now for cleansing. Thank you that you freely give it to all who come to you. Amen.

[32 : 31] God