

Mark 6:53-7:30

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Is it as cold down there as it is up here? It's pretty cool. I wonder if you would turn in your Bibles to Mark chapter 7 that was read for us, page 842 and 843.

Mark 7. One of the key reasons that we turn to the Word of God in Mark's Gospel is because Jesus says things to us and things about us that we would never dare to say to each other.

And the meat of today's passage, you're never going to hear at school or university or in a legal fraternity. You're never going to hear it in the media or in a corporation or a political platform.

Yet without this disturbing diagnosis from Jesus, we cannot understand ourselves, we cannot understand each other, we cannot understand the modern world in which we live, and we cannot even begin to understand the grace of God, the reality of Jesus Christ, apart from what he says here about the human heart.

So I'm very conscious as we come to this this morning that we need the help of the Holy Spirit because I can't convince you of the truth of this. I can't even convince myself of it.

[1 : 28] It's only God alone who gives us the ability to believe it, and it's only as we come to see the devastating truth of what Jesus says about us here that we begin to grasp the beauty of his love and kindness and grace because the two things belong together.

So let's have a look at the passage. And I'm just going to focus on the meat of the passage, 7, 1 to 23. What sets the passage off in verse 1 is the coming of a group of Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem to Jesus.

And they see that some of Jesus' disciples do not ritually wash their hands before eating, and they are outraged. And in verse 5 they demand, why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders and eat with defiled hands?

Explain yourself. It seems like a pretty trivial matter, right? Hand sanitising? Hand sanitising? But how Jesus answers this group will lead to his execution.

As you had it read, the passage is full of references to clean and unclean. What defiles? And it has nothing to do with hygiene.

[2 : 53] It's got nothing to do with bodily health. The clean and unclean division is about a deeply held group identity and acceptance.

Since the end of the Old Testament, the Jewish nation had had a lot more contact and connection with the pagan nations roundabout. And what dominated the conversation in those hundreds of years was this question.

How do we maintain our unique identity as God's people as a group? It's a very good question. So the commandment says, keep the Sabbath day holy, do no work on it.

What does that mean? What constitutes work? So they worked out some traditions, rules about that. If we are a people for God's own possession, how do we live out our holiness and keep ourselves holy?

What practices, what patterns do we need? Because the Bible doesn't cover every situation. And it's a good concern, right? It's well-motivated.

[3 : 59] And over time, every group develops patterns and rules, traditions of how to be together, despite what Will said this morning. There's nothing wrong with traditions and rules in themselves.

Every family has them. No group can function without them. And when you're in a situation where your very identity as a group is contested, these human rules and human traditions become more urgent.

So it's not just about the washing of bowls and cups and hands. It's a group identity of Israel. And over time, these traditions and practices became the normal way of thinking, so that what was intended initially to supplement and help and protect the Word of God gradually came to replace the

Word of God.

Now, I think the closest modern equivalent of this is what we call identity politics. Some people call it wokeness.

But I don't think that word woke is a helpful word, probably. The Oxford Dictionary defines woke in two ways. It says, being alert to injustice in society, especially racism.

[5 : 15] And the second definition is, the act of being very pretentious about how much you care about a social issue. So it's probably not a helpful descriptor. And we have to say together as brothers and sisters, don't we, that there's been a long history of systemic injustice, suffered by racial, social minorities, and that God has a special concern for the poor and the marginalised and the outsider.

And I think the current woke movement is an understandable reaction to the genuine suffering of minorities, to the moral relativism of 50 to 100 years ago, and to the vacuous of modern life, living for consuming and producing.

And the central traditions of this new movement focus around equity, diversity, and inclusion, all of which come out of a Christian understanding of being made in the image of God.

But when they're separated from the image of God, they become, like for the Jewish leaders here, they become the basis for self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

They become a way to ostracise, to criticise, to censor those who don't practice your traditions, just like the Pharisees. Increasingly in our modern culture, writers are recognising the wokeness is a religious movement.

[6 : 48] It centres around an understanding of cleanness and uncleanness, depending on your group identity. Some group identities are innocent, some group identities are guilty.

The main guilty identity, of course, are white heterosexual males, who must be purged. And they must be purged so that innocent groups can rise to the top, those that have been genuinely oppressed must rise to the top and cleanse our society.

It's a religious view. A sin no longer lies in the human heart, but is located in certain groups that have privilege and must function as scapegoats to cleanse our society, as I said.

And it helps explain why we tear down old statues, because we need new saints to look up to. It explains why big corporations have created liturgies of intolerance that powerfully testify to the holiness of a group identity.

It's a new puritanism to protect the group identity, because when things are contested, human traditions and rules become more urgent.

[7 : 58] You may not buy that analysis, but I think it is a good rough parallel to the Jewish traditions of Jesus' day. So what does Jesus do in the face of these traditions?

He says two very piercing and powerful things in 7.1 to 23. Number one, he says every human created tradition will fail.

It doesn't matter how well motivated or well practiced, every human created religious tradition, religious rule or moral framework will inevitably lead to pride and hypocrisy.

Don't get me wrong. There's absolutely nothing wrong with washing hands. There's nothing wrong with moral frameworks. But there's something in us that makes us elevate our traditions and our rules above the Word of God, because they're easier to deal with than the Word of God.

They're external. They look more real. And the trouble is that the finest religious traditions and rules can never change our hearts. These Jewish leaders, they're the best of the best in their culture.

[9 : 17] They're highly educated. They're deeply motivated. They are concerned about the revelation of God in the Old Testament, and their rules and traditions, they believe, protect the revelation of God.

And Jesus goes straight at them, telling them that they have entirely lost the knowledge of God because they've substituted their traditions in place of the Word of God.

You see the distinction that Jesus makes through the passage. Verse 8, just have a look down. He says, This is the natural human process.

It seems very wise at the time, but it always goes wrong. Always. Traditions, rules, come to supplement the Word of God.

We add them because we want to help fill out the Word of God and supplement it. This is in church land. And then gradually, they become equally important with the Word of God, and finally, they replace the Word of God in life and practice.

[10:34] And what happens when we begin to do that is we overturn the rule of God with our own rule in the church of God, because traditions and rules are much easier to control than the Word of God.

And Jesus makes two very shocking applications, and we just only have time for one this morning. And the first one is to worship, in verses 6 to 8. He says, Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites. How's that for a starting line? As it is written, This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. He's quoting God here in the Old Testament.

In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandments of God and hold on to the traditions of men. I could never say that to anyone. You should never say that to anyone. And here is Jesus taking on the words of God from the Old Testament as though he's the Lord of Scriptures, and he says, Your lips are moving, and you're singing heartbreakingly beautiful words and tunes, but your heart is like years away from God.

[11:49] Your worship is empty. On the outside it looks great, but true worship is a matter of the heart. Strong, isn't it? Good worship is a wonderful thing.

I mean, great singing has great power to bind us together and help us in our faith. It's the mark of the people of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament, but it's just too easy to pretend, isn't it?

The reality is you could have the finest cathedrals with the finest choirs and the best music in the universe, or you could have the most moving, experiential praise music ever seen, and heaven looks down and says, It can be worthless, empty, waste of time, even narcissistic.

Jesus viewed the test or measure of true worship, worship that pleases God, is not the quality of music, is not the strength of our feelings, is not the volume that we're singing, is not our experience, is not even our taste.

The measure, according to Jesus, is whether it submits to the Word of God. Does the worship centre on and lead us deeper into the Word of God? Does it respond to the revelation of God in His Word?

[13:12] Which means that when we come to church, we're not asking, What will I make of the worship? Will I like the worship? But will I hear the Word of God? That's his first illustration.

And I need to ask, because we go on to the second point in the passage, why is it that the best motivated traditions always fail and can lead us away from God?

What is it about us? The second point Jesus makes in this passage is this. The heart of the problem is the human heart. And verses 14 to 15, he tells a little parable.

He says, he does this outside-inside thing, and he says, Look, traditions and rules can be helpful expressions of spiritual realities, but they only ever work in one direction.

They work this way. They work as an outward expression. If the reality is already there in the heart, they can't work in this direction. They can't create or maintain the reality in our hearts.

[14:16] And what happens is they so quickly come to replace it because of the nature of our hearts. And the disciples say to him, What are you talking about? And so Jesus says in verse 20, he gives them an answer.

Just look down at 720. He says, What comes out of a person is what defiles him, makes him unclean. For from within, out of the heart of man and woman, come evil thoughts, and now these are plurals, evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, and now single attitudes, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. Now, isn't that the exact opposite of what we believe today?

Our current pop culture creed says, Follow your heart. Be faithful to yourself. You are the solution. The answer lies within you. It's a statement of faith, and it's a gospel proclaimed in our movies, and in our music, and in our media. And along comes Jesus, and he says, Well, actually, your hearts have sociopathic tendencies.

[15:39] When Adam and Eve followed their heart, they ran away from God. When Moses followed his heart, he murdered the Egyptian. When the disciples followed their heart, they had a big fight about who was the greatest.

What we're seeing in Ukraine is the leader of Russia following his heart. The Bible has this sophisticated, two-sided anthropology view of humans.

As humans, we're vested with massive dignity, made to be the image of God. Which explains our capacity for great good, heartbreaking beauty, sacrifice, love, and generosity.

But at the same time, the evil that arises in the world comes from within us. It's what causes murder, and lies, and wickedness, and stealing. It arises from within.

This is the Bible view. It's also the Anglican view. Our hearts are terminally, incurably corrupt. It doesn't mean we're as bad as we could be, but it does mean that everything we do and everything we think is affected somewhere by narcissism and corruption, disobedience to God.

[16:51] There's no part of my life that's not touched by this, nor yours. And that means that the current idea that your heart is the most trusted inner compass, and that all you need to do is have the courage to follow it, and you'll find your true north, Jesus says, will lead to narcissism and the judgment of God.

Because there's nothing in this world that lies more to me than my own heart. My heart tells me that all of reality is there to serve me and my needs.

My heart thinks the best of me and the worst of you unless you think the best of me. My heart is very sensitive to criticism.

And when I'm criticised, my heart takes on the role of my inner lawyer, and it springs to my defence. Even if what I've done has no excuse whatsoever, I can fabricate a reason that'll make me the victim.

And my heart actively suppresses any information I don't like. Jesus says, you cannot trust your own heart. Are you with me so far?

[18:03] Strong, isn't it? If we put these two points together, this is how it rolls. No human rule or tradition, no moral construct can make any significant change.

Because it's out of the heart that evil comes. Or one of the strongest verses in the Bible, the Old Testament says, our hearts are diseased, they're sick.

In Jeremiah 17, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand it?

And the next verse says, I, the Lord, search the heart.

Well, if we left it there, we'd go home thoroughly miserable and depressed. You know, how was church today? Well, pretty dismal, thanks.

Why does Jesus say this and why does he say it here? Why does Mark put the teaching of Jesus here? Is there any hope for us? And what I want to do quickly with you is to put this passage back into its context.

[19:07] Because Mark 6 to 8 is dominated by bread. Stay with me. The passage of chapter 7 is hung between Jesus feeding the 5,000 in chapter 6 and feeding the 4,000 in chapter 8.

And bread is a picture of all that Jesus is offering us, what he's come to bring us. And the point of the bread stories, all of them, is the absolute overflow and abundance and surplus of his kindness and goodness and mercy toward us.

The lavishness of his grace. Can I just show you this? If you'd stay with me, please. Just look back to chapter 6, verses 30 to 44.

You remember the feeding of the 5,000? Let me go right to the end of the passage just to remind you how it finishes. Verse 42, and they all ate and were satisfied.

And that's a word, fullness and abundance word. It's more than satisfaction. And they took up 12 baskets full of broken pieces and of fish afterwards. One for each of the disciples.

[20:23] What's the point of the miracle? Christ does not have just enough power and grace for us to squeak by, but his power and kindness is overflowing, satisfying, abundant, lavish.

Then we have the storm on the lake, verses 45 to 52. And Jesus comes walking on the waves at 3 a.m. And what do the disciples do?

They scream out. Ah! Why? Verse 52, why do they scream out? For they did not understand about the loaves because their hearts were hardened.

In Mark, a hard heart is one that cannot see the oversupply, the free grace, the sheer free willingness of Jesus Christ to save us, to do good to us.

A hard heart is one that doubts the sufficiency of his love. Either that he cannot come through for us or that he doesn't really want to. So, test yourself.

[21:32] When something bad happens to us, when something does not happen that we want to happen, if your heart is hard, the first thought is to doubt the grace and power of Jesus Christ or to say, I must have done something wrong or to say, he doesn't really care for me or if I was in charge,

I would do it differently.

All of those things look to me for satisfaction and fullness. Hardness of heart is scarcity thinking. It's being suspicious of the grace of Jesus.

It's fear that somehow there's not enough goodness and kindness and power in Jesus to go around. Scarcity thinking is being obsessed with what I lack as though Jesus' blessing is a finite pie and if one person gets a big piece over there, it means there's less for me, less to go around.

And scarcity thinking reveals itself in anxieties and fears how fast I am to blame others. You know what the easiest way to deal with a scarcity mindset is?

It's to follow human traditions and rules because that way I bring my scarcity under control. And you can see the scarcity thinking of the disciples and the feeding of the 4,000 in chapter 8.

[22 : 54] Just cast your eyes over where Jesus is about to feed the 4,000 and in verse 4 the disciples ask the question on their minds. They say, how can one man feed these people?

Literally, how can one man literally fully satisfy all these people with bread? They've already seen him do it two chapters before.

They just can't bring themselves to believe in the overflow of Jesus' grace just like us. Verse 8, and they ate and were satisfied and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

I don't know why seven but there you are. Then they jump in the boat with Jesus and they discover they've only got one loaf of bread with them. Stay with me. And Jesus warns them in verse 14 to watch out for the way the Pharisees put their bread together.

They have this poisonous yeast in their traditions and the disciples miss out. They think he's talking about physical bread. So if you look down to 8:17, Jesus aware of this said to them, why are you discussing the fact that we have no bread?

[24 : 06] Do you not yet perceive and understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes, do you not see and having ears, do you not hear and do you not remember?

And here he goes. When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of pieces did you take up afterwards? And they say, 12. And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take?

They said, seven. He says, do you not yet understand? That's why our passage, chapter seven, with this dire diagnosis comes where it comes.

It's in the context of the massive overflowing grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not just his general grace in coming near to us and coming as our saviour, but drawing near to us specifically in our need and in our insufficiency.

It is the evil in our hearts that has drawn him out of heaven and reveals the richness of his compassion.

[25 : 18] It's exactly us he's come to serve, to give his life as a ransom. And it's his grace that opens our eyes. And even the devastating diagnosis of our hearts is a gift of his grace because he tells us the truth about ourselves so that we might see something of the richness of the truth about him.

We can't believe the one without the other. We find it very difficult to believe that human systems and rules and traditions cannot contain his grace.

That's why we hold our traditions more tightly. Now I'd like to say just two more things before we finish. That is, did you notice that chapter seven, one to twenty-three, is sandwiched between two little sections?

And these two little sections before and after it illustrate the point of overflow. So if you go back to six, fifty-three to fifty-six, this is the only time in Mark's Gospel when people bring sick to Jesus and he doesn't proclaim the Gospel.

The emphasis is their desperate need and the all-sufficient kindness of Jesus, his power to heal. The whole countryside brings their sick to him.

[26 : 41] He heals them all. He heals them all. He heals them all. There's no mention of faith. There's no preaching the forgiveness of sins. The people want their sick healed. They've got no interest in Jesus or his message of the kingdom.

They just want to use him for what they want to get and amazingly, such is the sufficiency of his grace that he gives it to them. That's what he's like. Jesus does not love us for our loveliness.

What wins his love for us is our unloveliness because his goodness overflows and he multiplies his compassion on us.

It doesn't matter how wayward or how wandering you've been, his heart is for you. And then the little passage at the end, the Syrophenician woman in 724-30 is absolutely beautiful.

Jesus has gone right outside Israel. He's amongst the enemies of Israel in Tyre and Sidon. And he's approached by a woman. You couldn't have a woman who's more far an outsider.

[27 : 49] Jewish tradition refers to them as dogs because of their uncleanness. She is completely aware of her need and her insufficiency. Her daughter is possessed by an unclean demon.

And she lays her need before Jesus and begs him to help. And the way the passage runs, Jesus instantly heals the daughter without telling her.

It happens offstage. But then what he does is he draws out her real hunger and satisfies her with his grace. I'll just point this out.

What's lovely and astonishing is that she grasps the overflow of mercy and grace. That the grace of God is going to go beyond the boundaries of Israel.

That his grace is sufficient for her. That's the point of the crumbs on the floor. She's the first person in the gospel to call Jesus Lord, to believe a parable and act on it.

[28 : 48] And she is soft-hearted. She pleases God. This is what Jesus is looking for. She knows she doesn't deserve anything from Jesus and that apart from grace all is lost.

And that unless his grace overflows to her, her daughter is also lost. And see, she uses this beautiful picture of the crumbs on the floor which we use in our communion service.

We're not worthy so much as to gather the crumbs under your table. She sees the grace of Jesus is sufficient. She gets it. She's not trying to control Jesus by her rules or her traditions.

She stakes all her hope not on what she deserves, not even on her need, but on the reality of the sufficiency, abundance and freedom of Jesus' grace.

One crumb, she says, is sufficient because you are the bread of life. as Jesus said later to the Apostle Paul, my grace is sufficient for you.

[29 : 53] My power is made perfect in weakness. Let's pray. Mm-hmm. SHE's not ya■ing in me. She notices