

# What Is Effective Worship

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Date: 01 September 1985

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I'd like you to turn to the New Testament lesson, the Gospel lesson, which is the Gospel according to St. Mark, chapter 7, beginning at verse 1. This is a special Sunday by reason of the fact that suddenly a lot of people who are in the congregation will disappear in the course of the next week to various schools and work in various parts of the country.

And I want you to greet them warmly and wish them well and tell them you look forward to seeing them back, whoever they are, and they may designate themselves in the course of the service.

This morning's lesson is really fairly funny in a way. I'm not sure whether we have good times all the time, but certainly I think by reason of the times in which we live and the burdens which we bear, we tend to be a fairly sad lot these days, and not having much fun that isn't in the form of rebellion.

Just good fun. So I hope you'll find in the lesson this morning a certain amount of good fun, and it's coming as it does from the seventh chapter of Mark.

I want you to know that I was just over with the children, and all your children who've gone over there have already been taught that it's not important to wash their hands.

[ 1 : 3 8 ] So how you're going to deal with that, I don't know, but there it is, and your argument will have to be with the text for the day as to how you're going to get around it.

Now, let's be quiet and bow our heads as we begin to look at this passage. Father, we think of the gentle and loving incisiveness of Jesus Christ as he cut right through to the heart of matters over and over again in the things he taught, the things he did, in the way he lived.

Our Father, help our hearts and the whole of our lives to be open to the incisiveness of the things which Jesus is teaching here, that we may be caught where we need to be caught and healed where we need to be healed.

We ask this in his name. Amen. If you were to look carefully at Mark chapter 6, you would discover that Jesus had in that chapter come to the attention of King Herod, who thought in his bad moments that maybe this was John the Baptist come back from the dead, and he was not looking forward to having to meet John the Baptist again, so he had no desire to meet Jesus.

Then Jesus gets away with his disciples for a short retreat and 5,000 people there that need to be fed. And he takes the loaves and the fishes and he feeds the 5,000.

[ 3 : 2 5 ] Then that night, as the disciples are going home across the Sea of Galilee, and the storm overtakes them, and Jesus commands the storm to be still.

And then, in the same chapter 6, Jesus sends out 12 of his disciples on a mission, and they go throughout Galilee, healing, casting out demons, and bringing the good news to people in many villages and towns.

Then Jesus himself, when they come back and rejoin him, he goes through towns, villages, cities, teaching, healing, casting out demons.

And when chapter 7 opens, the Pharisees, with the wonderful, the wonderful vocation of being religious detectives, are after him.

They're after him to prove that somehow he's a phony. Somehow he is not the real thing. And you know how easy it is and how important it is for all of us whenever we are confronted by a challenge which we're not prepared to meet, how important it is to get us the evidence whereby we can dismiss it.

[ 4 : 49 ] It's a great help to know that William Spurgeon smoked a pipe. Then we can dismiss all that he preached and all that he talked about because he wasn't a very good man if he would smoke a pipe.

And we get a hold of these little things and we try and work on them. So these detectives were working on Jesus because he represented a threat for the community.

He was able to heal. He was able to feed. He was able to still storms. He was able to challenge people through all the echelons of political and social and religious life in his community.

He was a very powerful person. There must surely be something wrong, something by which he could be discounted, something by which he could be disapproved of. And so they examined him closely and they looked at his disciples and it was his disciples that they latched onto.

And of course that still happens today because if you want to be disapproving of the church, all you've got to do is look at the people who go to church and you'll very soon find reason why you shouldn't.

[ 5 : 57 ] Look at the people who profess to believe and you'll very soon have the evidence on why you are of a nobler sort because you don't believe like them. Well, that's exactly what they did and they examined the disciples and they found, shocking as it may seem to you, that some of them ate without washing their hands.

And the Jews sort of pulled up their sleeves and washed right up to the elbows and washed carefully and made sure that everything was as clean as it could possibly be.

And I can't tell you this without thinking of a particular tragedy in my own life when a fellow student at university suddenly became obsessed with washing his hands.

And I know medical people have probably run into this, but hour after hour late into the night and early in the morning he would be there with soap and water and scrubbing brush cleaning and cleaning and cleaning hoping that somehow he could get them clean and he kept looking at them and it was a terrible, terrible disease to see somebody caught up in.

And finally he had to be taken and put under the care of a psychiatrist heavily sedated under what was then used of insulin shock treatment and for weeks and months he was right out of it trying to get at the problem which was expressed by his continually washing his hands and finding that he couldn't become clean by doing it.

[ 7 : 33 ] Well, these men had discovered that Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands. And so they decided that that was something that they could discount the whole ministry of Christ by simply pointing out that your disciples do not observe the tradition of the elders.

They don't do it. And so Jesus listened to them and he was aware of the fact that the Jews would not go into the marketplace without coming back and bathing themselves.

They would not eat. They had rituals for washing cups and washing pots and washing bronze vessels and washing beds. And they were very, very clean indeed. And Jesus saw this and he saw it and he turned to them and he said, the result of this, and there it is in verse 7, is that your worship is empty.

It's vain. It's useless. Because what you have done is you have taken the tradition of the elders, this washing of hands, and you've made it the really important thing.

Now, I can't tell you how terrible this is. I tell you it's terrible. You see, it's not because there was anything wrong with washing your hands before meals.

[ 9 : 07 ] There's nothing wrong with doing that. But when that is taken as the absolute law and the commandments of God are negated or laid aside so that you pay no attention to them but carefully observe these human traditions, then something has gone terribly wrong.

He tells them, giving them an example of how wrong it is in the next section which talks about Moses told you, for instance, honor your father and your mother.

And he added to that, he who curses his father or his mother shall be put to death. That's how important that law is. So he says to them, your elderly parents are living on dog food and soda biscuits and you're living the good life.

And you say, I would like to help you except that I have dedicated all that I have to God so it's not mine to dispose of. And so by observing that tradition, they completely undermine the commandment of God.

And you see, the function so often of religion is to teach you how to undermine the commandment of God. The commandment of God is still the same.

[ 10 : 30 ] Honor your father and your mother. Don't commit adultery. Don't murder. Don't bear false witness. Don't steal. Don't covet. Don't worship graven images.

Observe the Lord's day, the seventh day. Keep it holy. Love God. Those commandments are there and there's no way around them. And you have to confront them and be confronted by them.

Now the function of religion is to go to the adulterer and say, well, everybody does it. To go to the thief and say, well, circumstances are so funny in our world that what else can you do?

To go to the liar and say, it's expedient to lie from time to time. To, in effect, to cultivate covetousness in people because it's so good for the consumer market.

And on and on we go with our traditions which totally undermine the clear, straight, direct commandment of God so that people are no longer confronted by it.

[ 11 : 42 ] And how religion helps you to do that. And that's so true of Anglicanism. Little secondary things become so terribly important to people.

I was told when I first came here and didn't wear one of these one day that you couldn't celebrate a communion without one of these on. Now, when that happens you can see how religion becomes so hopeless because it becomes so involved with secondary things.

And at the heart of it is not people confronting the commandment of God. And so you see clearly what the result of that is when you see in verse 13 you thus make void the word of God.

the word of God becomes empty because so carried away are you by observance. I am embarrassed and this happens to me on lots of times but I'm embarrassed this morning by the letter that I've written to you in the bulletin which if you haven't read don't read.

I was put under a lot of pressure by the trustees on Tuesday night to raise the money. and they figured the best way to do it is get up there and preach.

[ 13 : 02 ] And so I didn't do it but I wrote the letter and thought I could inveigle you into a little system of raising some money. But I don't want to raise money. That's not my job and I'm sure it's not what the trustees wanted me to do either.

They wanted me to talk about stewardship. They wanted me to talk about how a man faces the word of God. And even such a simple scheme as raising money can be a substitute for people confronting the word of God.

Confronting the commandment of God. And that's what you have to do. Whether you happen to join this particular money raising scheme or not is not of ultimate importance.

The fact is that you live under and confronted by the word of God and that that's to affect everything that you do. That's how you are to order and structure your life in obedience to the word of God.

You see what it's like, what they do. And to put this in, you know those beer commercials that are on television all the time. Magnificent demonstrations of commercial art.

[ 14 : 22 ] And so wonderfully balanced and so wonderfully conducive to being cool having drunk. Being cool in your behavior.

Being cool on a hot day. Anyway, it's all about being cool. And the thing that it does for you is to show you how the whole of your life and all you ever hope to be and all you ever expect to be, is there enshrined for you in this beer commercial.

And if you can come to terms with that, and if you can take that can into your hand and drink it to the dregs, all your problems will be answered. Well, that's about what the Pharisees were doing.

Taking something which was totally superficial and making it dreadfully important and saying, this is the thing you must do, don't worry about the rest. And that's what in effect the Pharisees were persuading people to do.

So Jesus goes on and explains to them. He explains to them in verse 14 and 15, there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him.

[ 15 : 37 ] The things which come out of a man are what defile him. Now what Jesus is getting at there is that the problem is not out there, the problem is in here.

I saw a lovely hate letter yesterday which described the problem that was out there. But what it really was describing was the seething, convulsive grip of evil that had taken hold of somebody's heart and was being spewed out in this terrible letter.

there. And the recognition was that the problem was all out there and there was no recognition of the problem that was deep inside the person. And so that problem was not dealt with and that problem was made into a huge monument that filled the whole of the horizon for this.

And Jesus says it's not those things outside of you which are going to defile you, it's what's inside of you. He says because you happen to be out gardening and then come and make yourself a baked potato and happen to take a little soil in with your baked potato as you eat with your dirty hands.

That's not going to do you a heck of a lot of damage. You have a digestive system that will look after that. But when you feed your heart garbage all the time, then watch out because out of your heart will come the things that defile you.

[ 17 : 05 ] and he describes what they are. Out of our hearts come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.

There's 12 of them and they're all garden variety commodity. Not in the sense that you are out murdering and stealing, but you know your heart and you know what's going on there.

And it's that stinking pile of garbage which is at your heart and at mine that creates the problems for us. And by sort of smoothing it over so to speak, we think that somehow we're going to get by.

But you see what Jesus says is that if you don't recognize the commandments of God and you temporize with them and smooth them over and don't deal with them, those things are going to destroy you.

well, and the result of that is that your worship is going to be worthless. It's going to be void, vain, empty.

[ 18 : 26 ] The word of God is going to mean nothing to you because of that. Let me turn it around for you.

You see, how are we to worship them? How are we to stand before God as we do this morning? We are to allow the commandment of God to stand.

We're not to mess around with it. To say, well, we're not going to say that you have to do it or that you ought to do it or that God says you must do it. We just sort of accommodate that.

You are not to make such substitutions. you're not to mess around with thinking that beer commercials will provide you with eternal salvation, which is about what we do.

We get so terribly superficial and don't deal with the problems. When you come before God, and I'm having a hard time worshiping these days, because as soon as I come into church and kneel down and go through the prayers of the prayer book, for which I'm grateful, there erupts up out of my heart all sorts of garbage, hates and jealousies and petty things, and pride and arrogance and insecurity and guilt and failure.

[ 19 : 56 ] All this comes erupting up out of my heart. Now, what am I to do? Am I to say, oh, well, down, boy, down. I've got to get on with the business of worship.

Wash your hands. Keep the outside clean. What am I going to do with that? What am I going to do with the hate and the anger and the envy, the jealousy and the pettiness that is there in my heart, and that the commandment of God points directly to and says it's there?

How am I going to worship God with that? The Pharisees had the solution. Their solution was to forget about it and get yourself off onto a lot of petty rigmarole and legalism by which you could avoid the necessity of facing them.

You are to make no substitute. You're not to mess around with minor cures for major ills. And that's what religion so often does.

God provides you with minor cures for deadly diseases. That's why judgment begins with the household of God for us daring to do that.

[ 21 : 13 ] The thing is that God can take us seriously when we take ourselves seriously. When we acknowledge what is there, God can deal with that.

His arm is not shortened that he cannot say because we choose to be honest with him. It doesn't mean that we render him powerless.

We render him powerful because he alone can deal with it. Tell your friends your problems and they won't be particularly interested in meeting you again next week.

but opening up to God as he opens up to his word and his commandment to you is the means by which we can stand before him and worship him.

You know what our prayer book tells us to do. Oh come let us sing unto the Lord. Let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation. It says, we praise thee O Lord, we acknowledge thee to be our God.

[ 22 : 21 ] Heaven and earth worship you. We are to worship God in spirit and in truth. We are to give ourselves totally and utterly to the worship of God.

But when we try to do it, so often we suddenly confront as I described perhaps too graphically, but I don't think so, we suddenly confront the stinking garbage heap of our own hearts and say, can I worship God from here?

Let me assure you, you can worship God from nowhere else. Unless you acknowledge that reality in your heart, then your worship is like the worship of the Pharisees.

And their worship is that they honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. in vain do they worship me. The Jerusalem Bible says their worship is worthless.

They teach as doctrines the precepts of man. They leave the commandments of God and hold fast to the traditions of men. And their worship becomes utterly worthless.

[ 23 : 35 ] And that's why Jesus turns on them in this passage and tries to explain to him that if they will be honest before him, if they will allow him to be honest before them, that is, not temporize or compromise the word of God, but allow God to speak to them the things they need to hear, allow God to speak to us the things we need to hear, then our worship will be acceptable.

You see, when it comes to that letter, money is a good way of sort of putting a barometer on your heart to find out where you are spiritually.

I mean, even in most marriages, husbands and wives can't talk about it, let alone talk to God about it. And it raises for us so much guilt and so much covetousness and so much awareness of how we have compromised and mismanaged things and the troubles we have created for ourselves and for others all around the problems of wealth and how that vitiates the possibilities of our worship and how we try and provide little schemes whereby people can contribute to this or contribute to that and feel better for it.

that's not good enough. The worship of our hearts is what God demands. And God demands not that we spend our lives in keeping our accounts open or keeping our hands clean, but standing before him with all the guilt and all the sense of failure and all the sense of inadequacy and all the jealousy and all the covetousness and all the pride and all the arrogance and saying, Lord, I want to offer to you my whole heart's worship with all this included.

And that's what God asks us. That's what Christ in effect demands of us. our business is to our business is not to teach you how to get around that.

[ 26 : 02 ] Our business is to teach you. Our business is to learn how we can stand before God under his word and under his commandment, under the full impact of his word, under the full impact of his commandment.

And we have reason to confess our sins. And we have reason to hope that someone will pronounce absolution. Then we have reason to take the body of Christ broken for us and the blood of Christ shed for us because we know that's what we need more than anything else.

We need an eternal cure for an eternal disease. disease. And that's what God offers us in Jesus Christ.

And that's what the Pharisees refused to accept from Jesus Christ. He said to them, you hypocrites. God grant that he doesn't say that to us as we partake in this service of worship this morning.

Amen. Amen. Now we stand and we sing together our offertory hymn number 634.

[ 27 : 32 ] four. Amen. ■■■■■.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

[ 29 : 34 ] Thank you. Thank you.