

Clean Hands?

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[0 : 00] Mark 7, verse 5.

We're going to be looking at the whole of this passage from the beginning to verse 23, but we can take up the reading again at verse 5. And the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but they eat with defiled hands?

And he said to them, Well did Isaiah prophesy to 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.

And then all the way through to verse 23, where he lists all of the evils which are found not on the outside, but are found on the inside of all of us.

And that, says Jesus, is what defile a person, the sin that lies within. One word which would describe the present generation is sanitation.

[1 : 25] We live in a sanitized world, which has become somewhat obsessed with the clean. The first thing that happens when you visit the hospital is that you come across a bottle that is hung on the wall, a container which you dispense upon your hands, and that, they tell us, will prevent the spread of bacteria.

And I'm not being critical in any way, please don't get me wrong. And the same is true for if you intend to sell food or give food to the general public, you cannot do so legally or properly without having a food hygiene certificate.

And for that, you have to go through a course, much of which is all about the idea of being clean in the preparation of food. Even the ferry.

You can't go into the cafeteria on the ferry now without a bottle on the wall, a container on the wall, which you dispense on your hands in order to be clean and to prevent the spread of bacteria.

I have just spent the last 10 days in my house continuously telling our grandchildren to wash their hands before eating their food. And, of course, it's an important rule for any child or any person.

[2 : 48] It's a good practice to keep your hands clean before you are eating food. And it's not my intention today or any other time to be critical about that practice.

Well, this morning, come back with me in time to a very different culture, to a different people, different language, clothes, way of thinking, different type of houses, architecture.

We're going back to Judea, round about 30 AD. And guess what? The issue is sanitation, cleanliness, the washing of hands.

So right away, we know exactly what we're talking about, except that for them, for the Pharisees, who we're going to be talking about this morning, the issue was not the spread of bacteria.

I'm not sure how much they knew about the health benefits of keeping your hands clean. Their intention was not to remain healthy, but their intention was to keep out what they thought of as defilement.

[3 : 57] And they did so because they believed that to be more pleasing to God required you to keep certain things out.

And you had to do so in a certain way. It wasn't just a matter of washing your hands before you ate. That was just good practice. But you had to wash your hands in a certain way and you had to be seen to be doing it.

They had an order for how you washed your hands. And literally, it would take all the time that is available to me this morning to be able to describe that order to you.

It was so complicated. You had to go through a university degree almost to be able to know exactly what was required. For example, you had to lift your hands as you washed them.

In order for the water to run down and for you to make sure that it covered your wrists. But you did that, obviously, visibly in front of everyone in order not just to do what the right thing was, but in order to be seen to be doing what the right thing was.

[5 : 09] Because they believed that God was more pleased with you if you kept uncleanness away from you. And you did that, they thought, by making sure that your hands were washed and that whatever utensils that you used in the process of eating and drinking were kept clean.

Now, remember that Jewish law was, it wasn't civic law, this was religious law. It was all about who was in with God and who wasn't.

Who God was pleased with and who God was not pleased with. And so the Pharisees, as experts, they were regarded by the ordinary men and women in the street as celebrities.

They knew who they were because of their clothes and because of their attention to detail. And people would look up to them in a way that said, we will never be right with God because we can never live the way that these men live.

They are continuously showing us how wrong we are and how much we fail to keep God's requirements and God's laws. And so the Pharisees, instead of inviting people into the kingdom of God and pointing them to the promised forgiveness that there was in the Messiah, their way of life, they might as well have had a shirt saying, keep away, keep out of the kingdom.

[6 : 39] The kingdom is not for you. There is no hope for you and there is no forgiveness for you because we are the ones who meticulously do everything on the outside that is right.

And so when Jesus came and when they saw that his practice did not have the attention to detail that their practice had, they were horrified. They went to the disciples and they said, how come if your master, if your leader is supposed to be such a rabbi, a teacher of our ways, then why does he not do what we do?

Now, I think I should stop here and say that their practice, their ritual of washing hands and washing cups and washing utensils and all of that had absolutely nothing to do with the Old Testament and God's law.

This was what they had added themselves through their rabbis to what God had originally said in the Old Testament. And they had complicated it to an absurd degree in which it was almost impossible to do what this law required you to do.

That was, of course, the intention, to keep people out and to separate the Pharisees and the scribes as an elite religious group. And they believed that they had the favor, the special favor of God by adding to what God's law required.

[8 : 09] Imagine their horror when they heard Jesus reply, 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.

So the very thing that they believed and assumed that they were doing what was pleasing to God was the very thing that they were failing to do.

God was not pleased with them according to Jesus. Now I want us to look this morning at three particular things that Jesus says in this whole passage.

I want us to see, first of all, that God hates hypocrisy. And that is found in verse 6. 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.

God hates hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is when you're one thing on the inside and you're another thing on the outside. Where you're almost a split personality.

[9 : 24] And where what you want, what's most important in your life is what people see on the outside rather than what you really are on the inside. But Jesus insists that God looks at what we are on the inside.

Rather like what I was trying to say to the children earlier on. Watching us from the inside. Because it is from the inside that the outside results in.

God starts on the inside and he hates hypocrisy. And then the second thing I believe that this passage teaches us is that God hates when we twist his message.

You'll find that in verse 8 where Jesus goes on to say that you leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. And then he gives this example of Korban.

And I want to try and explain that to you. How the Pharisees they managed to escape the requirements of God by twisting God's word itself.

[10:29] And then thirdly when he moves on to what it is that defiles a person and makes him sinful in the eyes of God. Jesus says it's not what you eat that makes you sinful in the eyes of God. It's what you are in your own heart. That's where the focal point must be. You say that in order if we keep out certain things if we live a certain way if we observe certain rules and commands which we're adding to all the time that God somehow will make everything okay. No says Jesus. Because you've got it wrong from the very beginning. You fail to see that it's in your heart that you sin against God either by what there is there or what you fail to do. That's where that you have to focus on. So there's three things. That God hates hypocrisy. God hates the perversion of his word. And thirdly that defilement is not what goes into you but it's what's there already.

Firstly then we're focusing on the honour of God. The true where true worship is. And remember when I talk about worship I'm not just talking about what we're doing this morning or on a Wednesday or when we read the Bible in the house.

[11:56] I'm talking about our whole lives. There's a sense in which all of life is service to God and God comes with us into everything that we do. And it begins not with what we are on the outside but what we are on the inside.

I guess it's true to say that there's a sense in which there's nothing worse than a person who pretends to look good on the outside while all the time there is no real love for God on the inside. That's what the Pharisees were. They were perfectionists. But their hearts were complacent. They had no real love for God. For them God was simply a matter of doing all the right things wearing all the right clothes doing the right thing at the right time in order in order to be important in the eyes of men and women.

Remember that other passage in Matthew where Jesus again criticizes the Pharisees for loving to stand on the corners of the streets in order to be seen of men.

When they fasted they did it visibly. They told everyone they were going to fast in order for people to look up to them and say I wish I was so good as that person. Jesus says they're not good at all.

[13:16] They're not even beginning. They're not even on the right road. They're lost. In their hearts their hearts are open sores they're open wounds because they have failed to grasp the fundamental starting point which is that we need to be cleansed from the sin in which our hearts are not right with God.

The moment you think you can impress God by anything you do that you're saying basically that you're not a real sinner at all and that you don't need salvation the salvation that he offers us. And the Pharisees were proud of their outward show but the more the prouder they were the more culpable they were in the eyes of God really because God looks at the heart and he continues to do so all through the generations this passage is hugely relevant to where we are today because there is something of the Pharisee in every single one of us.

You're perhaps horrified when I say that you say well that may be true for other people but it's not true for me. There is something of the Pharisee in every single one of us something in which the moment we think of being right with God we think of what we do.

We think of what we must do. We think of how we must act. Now I'm not saying our lifestyle is not important. I'm not saying that we should just love God and just it doesn't matter how you live.

[14:50] God says it does matter how we live but being right with God is not a matter of keeping all the rules. Being right with God is accepting Jesus Christ as our substitute and our saviour so that our sins are forgiven.

And so today if you haven't yet come to faith in Jesus Christ and you and you think about being right with God what are your first thoughts?

It's how to live the rules that you must keep that you don't swear that you don't drink too much that you come to church that you do the best you can.

There are thousands millions of people in the world who think like that in every culture. They think that being right with God is a matter of observance and it's the same in our culture.

I remember quite a number of years ago meeting someone in the street and he was the worst for wear and it didn't come from this it didn't come from the Stornoway it came from another part of the island.

[16:06] Within minutes he was rebuking me because I wasn't wearing the minister's collar and he says your father would never have been seen in Cromwell Street in a shirt in an open shirt.

So I tried to explain to him is that what really matters? He said yes and he was seriously upset seriously angry because for him this was a challenge to his belief in everything having to be in the right place.

but that's not what God is looking for at all. He's not looking at the outward. He's looking at the inward. Let me ask you a question this morning.

How much time did you spend and again I'm using I don't want to criticize in any way but it's just an interesting question. How much time did you spend getting ready for church on the outside?

You took a shower what is that for 20 minutes? You stand in front of the mirror you choose a shirt or a top you choose a suit it's not so much for men men don't really spend a lot of time choosing what they wear it's always the same thing anyway and I'm not going to criticize anyone else but I'm just trying to say how much time did we spend getting ready for church 20 minutes half an hour in the mirror making sure everything is okay now okay I'm not that's not a problem.

[17:32] There's nothing wrong with that. Let me ask another question how much time did you spend on the inside preparing for church? Preparing your heart to come and worship because surely that's what the Lord is looking at.

I'm not saying not to concentrate on the outside but I'm saying I'm saying that the beginning the beginning is what we are with God whether you're a believer or whether you're not a believer there's something of the Pharisee in every one of us and God looks to the heart.

The second thing of course is the again the problem lies within our hearts. Verse 8 he says you leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men and then he goes on to say that 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 and mother must surely die but you say if a man tells his father and mother whatever you would have have gained from me is korban that is given to God then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father and mother now this needs a little bit of explanation doesn't it let me try and explain it what it is the fifth commandment is honour your father and your mother how do you put that into practice well when you're a young person that means submitting to the rule in the home and when you leave the home it doesn't end there for the Jewish people quite rightly so there was no welfare state then the provision that was made for your father and mother in older age when they were no longer able to work was your responsibility so if you had a father and mother who were unable to work and live for themselves you were responsible for looking after them but what the Pharisees did was this they devised a way in which they could dedicate all their belongings their money their goods to the temple by so doing they were dedicating it to God and this was a vow and when you made that vow of korban then all your goods your money your property it was all given to

God and was not allowed to be given to anyone else what they did was that when they discovered that looking after their father and mother was going to be a costly and a long term business some of them would say okay my goods my money my property is korban from now on I'm going to make this vow and I'm going to dedicate it to God and they believed that that relieved them of the responsibility of looking after their father and their mother it was not it was an act of sinfulness in which they were disregarding God's command to look after their father and mother honour your father and mother ostensibly on the outside they were they were doing something which looked to be so religious and so righteous my goods are now dedicated to

God but God saw everything and he says they're not dedicated to me these are goods and property that should have gone towards observing my commandment which is to look after your father and your mother and if you really dedicated yourself to me you would look after them you would do what I said in the first place and not try and twist my word in order to satisfy your own selfish interests that's what they were doing because when you when you dedicated your goods and your money to God you could still use them yourself the thing was that nobody else could use them and after you died they were all given to the temple meanwhile while they were in your possession you could use them for anything you wanted to and so that was their way that was a cop-out it was their way of getting out of the fifth commandment and all the time everybody's thinking wow these men are so holy but they had twisted the commandment of God and there were many other ways in which they had found a way of getting out of it was a week but like the kind of tax scandals that we hear about nowadays where you find a loophole somewhere and if there isn't one already you make your own loophole in order to benefit yourself but if you really are right with

[22 : 34] God this morning then yourself takes the lowest position God takes the first position and when God takes the position of Lord when he is at the center then the people who are around you they take second place and they will God gives you responsibility towards them you have to love God your Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength commandment number two is to love your neighbor as yourself and your neighbor includes those who are in the same house as you includes those who are in your neighborhood those you work with because somehow God has providentially have you ever thought of this that God right now think of all the people that you know and are related to and live in the same house as you your relatives whether you get on with them or not somehow in the providence of God God has brought you into a relationship with them and them were a relationship with you and you have a responsibility towards all those who you live with in this world whether they are neighbors or whether they are family members or whatever and in so doing who knows what God will do through you in their lives and so and so if God takes the first place then you will love him first of all but you will love those who are in contact with you who God has placed you among and that includes our family members also and I guess this is a challenge to many people because it's all too easy to disregard the needs to fall out with people and I'm not saying it's an easy thing of course it can be a very difficult thing especially when personalities clash but if you're a Christian today and the fruit of the spirit is love joy long suffering goodness patience self-control forgiveness Jesus said that when your brother sins against you you leave your gift at the altar and you go and be right and reconciled with your brother that's what it means to love God and to love others at the same time and then the third aspect of this part of this passage is where

Jesus moves on and he goes on to talk about the things that defile a person we've said already the Pharisees believed that they became defiled by what they allowed to enter into their bodies by eating but Jesus said you've got it wrong it's what we are on the inside that has defiled us and so the Pharisees believed that they could control their own sinfulness by controlling what they ate or at least by making sure that they washed their hands as long as they kept to the right rituals washing and eating they were somehow closer to God and that assumes that the person is good in the first place but the Bible tells us that that is a wrong assumption we are not good in the first place we are fallen the heart of man is desperately wicked and deceitful which means that as we are there is no hope for our cleansing until of course I'm going to say this in a few moments time until we come to faith in

Jesus Christ and come to see what Jesus has done for us by dying on the cross so it's like this the mouth said Jesus can be used for two things can be used in terms of what goes inside your body in terms of what you eat but it's also used for what you say and the destructive nature of what is an expression of what's inside your heart is very often what the mouth is used for you don't have to look at the defiled foods unclean foods to find out what you really are or to make yourself worse Jesus says that already the heart is deceitful and sinful evil thoughts he says sexual immorality theft murder adultery coveting wickedness deceit how can you read that it's difficult for us to read that isn't it because the moment we read that we become convicted you read that and you ask yourself am I really free from this list in its entirety no you're not neither am

I believe me neither am I envy slander pride foolishness all these evil things says Jesus come from the inside and they defile and they defile a person now why was to drive home to the Pharisees and the scribes and indeed to everyone who was round about him that the heart of man is sinful that's why he came into the world to take away that sinfulness we need to be saved and he had to show that the Pharisees who were the religious leaders of the day they were guilty of these very same things and that meant that everyone was guilty of these very same things he had to show that by observing the religious rituals that we cannot make ourselves clean and to show that in ourselves there is no hope of salvation we are defiled already and so that left them to think long and hard about what

[28 : 33] Jesus has said indeed it left them with what we might call a massive dilemma the dilemma was this either Jesus was wrong and they were right or Jesus was right and they were wrong now if Jesus was wrong and they were right then they just carry on in their practices the problem was this if you believe that you can be right with God by doing the right things where does it all end if I believe today that I could be more pleasing to God by taking all the right boxes how do I know that I'm taking enough boxes how do I know that at the end of the day when it comes to me standing before God I will have accomplished enough what's the pass mark 50% 60% 80% how

many things I have to achieve how long do I what's the length of my placement on this earth how long do I have to prove myself to

God in order for him to say well that's long enough now you've proved yourself you're into the kingdom no I will never ever know and neither will you that you have done enough to please God there's another question what about when I know I haven't done enough to please God when I what about I know these instances these occasions in my life where I have actively and deliberately sinned and there isn't a single person in this church today who cannot remember a point in their life when they have deliberately and actively sinned who is going to pay for that because God says the soul that sins it will die you will die the wages of sin is death and that includes even one single sin because the past mark this morning is not 50 60 70 80 90 it is a hundred God demands perfection if you sin in one element you've sinned in every element so that was a dilemma that the Pharisees would have been in if

Jesus was wrong and they were right then they were left with this awful question how do I know that I am doing enough to please God and it's the same with you tonight today if that's the way you think if you think that pleasing God is doing this doing your best trying your best observing everything that you then how do you know that you will ever achieve God's command you won't the other alternative was that they were wrong and he was right do you know what an expert is I'm sure that there are many experts in here today of various things you don't have to have a university degree to be an expert you can be an expert in all kinds of different things you can be an expert in fishing what that means is that you've spent years perfecting the art of casting whether it's a fly fisherman or a worm and you know exactly the weather to go out in you know the kind of loch you want to fish in and you know the kind of rod that you buy and the reel that you buy and you know a good reel or a bad reel and you know the best time in the year and all that that's an expert you can be an expert in sheep rearing you know different varieties of sheep you've spent your whole like years looking after sheep you know when a sheep goes when it becomes injured you know your sheep each one of them you can distinguish one from the other because you take it seriously you know the food that you give them at various times of year you know the mating times and so on and so forth you're an expert you're experts all over the world in various different things the one thing that you don't want the biggest nightmare if you're an expert in anything what will challenge your pride more than anything else is someone who comes along and says actually you're wrong if you're an expert and you know you're an expert then that's a real conflict that is a real challenge and the first thing you want to do is to just take your leave of that person you don't want to listen to them but that's what would have happened that was the other alternative that all these years the Pharisees had been so religiously observing all these things doing all the right things taking all the right boxes and then Jesus comes along and says you're completely wrong you've been wasting your time all these years because what you fail to see is that God looks on the heart and your heart is full of deceit and wickedness and sinfulness and unless unless that is what is cleansed then you have no hope of ever entering into the kingdom of God now if they were going to listen to him then that required them to abandon everything that they had ever assumed and learned and practiced for years and years of their life but that's what had to happen and on this occasion Jesus left them to think about where the root of the problem lay the answer to the problem is found later on in the gospel the answer to the problem is that

Jesus came into the world to take away our defilement and our guilt by dying on the cross and so therefore what we are being asked to do this morning and what the Pharisees were asked to do you remember in John chapter 6 when they followed him and they said master what must we do here's that question again do to do the works of God that's the way they thought all was the same what must we do to do the works of God it's the same as the rich young ruler he came to Jesus and he said good teacher what must I do to enter into the kingdom of heaven it was always a matter of what they did so when the people asked Jesus in John chapter 6 what must we do to do the works of God Jesus answered with this the work of God is this to believe in the one that he has sent to believe and the moment you believe by casting yourself upon him and by surrendering yourself to him by resting in

[35 : 04] Jesus you're taking his death to be the payment of all your defilement and you're accepting his sacrifice which cleanses all the rottenness and the shame and the ugliness and the guilt and takes it all away that's the only answer and as long as you are concentrating on what you are on the outside you'll never get there the moment you discover what you're really like on the

inside that's the moment that you will run to Jesus and accept not what you can do for him that's of no value whatsoever but accept what he has done for you take it accept it turn away from everything that is empty and sinful and guilt ridden in your life and accept him because that's what he offers you today now in the gospel let's play together and father in heaven we ask today that you will take your word and pray that you'll make it powerful because your spirit is able to take this word and is able to open up our hearts and to convict our hearts

Lord as to where we really are we pray that you will bless this service pray that it will be an instruction to each one of us and a challenge to each one of us and indeed an encouragement to come to Jesus for we ask in him his name amen psalm 96 the sing song