What Really Defiles

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[0:00] Would you turn with me to the Gospel of Mark chapter 7? Mark 7 verses 1 through 23 is what we'll be looking at this morning. That's page 791 in the Pew Bible. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers are the chapters and the small numbers are the verses.

Mark chapter 7 verses 1 through 23. Well, let me pray for us and then I'll read. Father in heaven, what a mighty prayer.
We have just sung. Take my life and let it be always, only, all for thee. Father, that is the kind of posture that we desire now as we come to your word.
That you would give us an openness, a surrender, a trust in what you are saying to us through your word. We know that we cannot do that in our own strength and our own desire so we pray for your spirit to come now and give us listening ears and hearts to truly hear what you are saying.
God, thank you for your word, that it is clear and powerful and that it does the work you desire to exalt Christ in our midst, that we might see him and love him and be changed more and more into his image by your grace.
[1:17] We pray this in his mighty name. Amen. All right, Mark 7, 1 through 23. Now, when the Pharisees gathered to him, that is to Jesus, 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 properly, 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.
[2:33] 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, 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 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's 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, the 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?
Thus he declared, all foods clean. And he said, What comes out of a person is what defiles him.
[3:58] 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 things come from within, and they defile a person. So perhaps this has happened to you too.

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You're out at a restaurant, and you decide to use the restroom. And there, next to the sink, is a sign. All employees must wash their hands before returning to work.
Now, I don't know about you, but two thoughts seem to simultaneously cross my mind when I see a sign like that. On the one hand, I guess I'm glad that the restaurant cares about the hygiene of their workers and the cleanliness of their food.
But at the same time, I'm thinking, do the workers really need to be reminded to wash their hands before returning to work? What if the sign wasn't there? Would they forget?
[5:10] What does that say about the workers? What does that say about this restaurant and the food I've just eaten? Well, our passage today on the surface is about washing hands.

But in Jesus' day, this topic was about much more than just personal hygiene. It was about holiness, about being clean and acceptable before God and being set apart as God's people.
You see this from the language they use, that the Pharisees aren't just concerned that Jesus' disciples have dirty hands.
No, the word they use is defiled. Literally, it's common, which meant at the time, ceremonially or ritually unclean.
Now, there were a number of ways you could become ritually or ceremonially unclean, according to the Old Testament. Eating certain foods, having certain skin diseases, coming into contact with a dead animal or a dead body, these things and some others would render you unclean, according to the cleanliness laws of the Old Testament.
[6:21] And that meant, if you were unclean, that you couldn't enter the temple and you couldn't worship in God's presence with God's people. And there were certain things that you had to do that you could do to become clean again, like sacrifices or offerings or certain washings.

Now, the point of all this in the Old Testament was to teach the people and to keep before the people this great fact that God is infinitely holy and we are not.
and that to be in God's presence, we need a deep cleansing. We need to be washed. We need to be purified. That's what all those laws were meant to be demonstrating and teaching the people.
Now, you might think that such a topic like this sounds a little irrelevant today, right? After all, you probably didn't wash your hands this morning in hopes that you'd achieve ritual purity so we'd let you in the front door of the church, right?
But if you stop and think about it, the desire to be clean, the desire to be accepted, the desire to be free from stain, the desire to be whole, that desire is just as real and prevalent today as it ever has been.
[7:46] How many people today are longing for just that? Even if they don't have any belief in God or any kind of adherence to a traditional religion, we feel unclean and we're not even sure why.

Now, the controversy that Jesus has with the Pharisees here, or rather that the Pharisees raised with him in verses 1 through 5 kind of falls out into two parts. The first part in verses 6 through 13 is all about who gets to define what's clean or unclean.
And the second part in verses 14 through 23 is about where real uncleanness comes from. So first, who gets to define it? And second, where does it really come from?
And if we can see how Jesus answers those two questions, then we'll be able to see the answer that Jesus gives and the Bible gives for how to really deal with it. So first, let's look at the question of who gets to define what's clean or unclean in verses 6 through 13.
And the answer that Jesus gives in a nutshell here is not human tradition, but God's word. It's not human tradition or custom that truly defines what's clean or unclean, but God's word alone.
[9:02] Notice the question that the Pharisees and the scribes, that is the religious experts, ask in verse 5. Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?

And we see in verses 3 and 4 that Mark, probably for the benefit of his Gentile readers, sort of describes briefly what some of those traditions were that they were referencing.
Things like washing hands properly before eating a meal or ceremonial washing when returning from the marketplace because the marketplace obviously was a dirty place.
You could have come into contact with anything unclean there. Things like rinsing cups and pots, things like even sprinkling or washing the dining furniture. Now, where did these rules come from?
Well, they did not come from the Old Testament, from God's law, the Torah. These rules, they came from a body of unwritten oral tradition that had grown up and developed after the Old Testament

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was written.
[10:06] And for advocates of this oral tradition, you see, you see, well, how did that oral tradition crop up? Well, it came to be believed that the Torah, that God's word, was too ambiguous to establish and govern the Jewish community.

After all, the written commandments declared what God decreed, but not always how they were supposed to be fulfilled. So the oral tradition grew up and began to prescribe in increasing detail how the intent of the Torah ought to be fulfilled in actual circumstances.
And by Jesus' day, adherence to this unwritten oral tradition started to become as important for groups like the Pharisees as was their adherence to Torah itself.
That the oral tradition was just as authoritative as God's word. Some people even began to believe that Moses had received two laws on Mount Sinai, the written Torah and the oral tradition, and that both had been handed down.
So you can see why the Pharisees were disturbed when they saw Jesus' disciples not following the tradition of the elders. But what's Jesus' response?
[11:26] How does Jesus evaluate this human tradition? Verse 6, 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.
That's a quote from Isaiah 29. And Jesus says, You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. Jesus calls them hypocrites.
hypocrites. That is, they're saying one thing but doing another. They're saying that they're upholding God's law, but in reality all they're doing is holding on to a man-made tradition.
And this makes their worship of God, Jesus says, empty or vain. It's empty because it's not God that they're obeying or following. It's simply human custom.
[12:29] But the problem gets worse. It's not just that they've added human traditions to God's word. Jesus says in verse 9, you have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition.

Jesus is saying you cannot hold on to tradition without letting go of God's commandments. Now that's quite a charge. Jesus gives the example here of the fifth commandment, honor your father and your mother, and that was such a serious command that cursing or reviling your father and mother in ancient Israel could be charged as a capital offense.
Clearly this is something God takes very seriously. And yet in the first century there was a practice rooted in the oral tradition of korban, which means offering or gift as in an offering to God.
What would happen is that if someone were to declare that their goods or their property or korban, it was to make a vow that said when I'm done using this property, these goods, this wealth, when I'm done using this, it's all going to be given over to God and donated to the temple.
Essentially the idea was something like deferred giving, right? Today a person can will their property to a charity or an institution at their death, but in the meantime they get to keep possession over it and get to keep the proceeds and the interest that accrue from it until they die and then it goes to whatever charity they assign it to, right?
[14:00] Likewise, in the first century, if a son, for example, declared all his property korban, it would eventually go to the temple. But what that meant was that because it had been given to God, he didn't need to use it to take care of his aging parents.

In essence, you would vow it to God and that would absolve you of any responsibility to use it during your lifetime to care for others, even your parents.
And notice verse 12, Jesus says, you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother.
There are some historical records that show that once property had been sort of vowed or offered to God in this way or promised to the temple in this way, priests would even discourage anyone from withdrawing it from korban in order to return it to regular use.
Now you can see how they perhaps justified such a practice, right? After all, doesn't God deserve our very best? Doesn't our commitment to God rank higher than even our commitment to our earthly parents?
And so your offering of your property to God supersedes giving to your parents, right? But in reality, the human tradition of korban nullified God's word.

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[15:32] Rather than obeying God, they rejected what God's word plainly said. Honor your father and your mother, which certainly entailed caring for them in their aging and in their need.

And this wasn't an isolated example. Jesus says, and many such things you do. This kind of thinking was standard procedure, Jesus says, elevating human tradition and thereby rejecting God's word.
So who gets to define what's clean or unclean? Human tradition? Human customs?
No, Jesus says, God's word alone. Any attempt to supplement or add to God's word with human tradition or human custom will only end up supplanting or undermining or replacing God's word.
And this wasn't just a problem for first century Pharisees. Church history has replayed this danger again and again and again. Whenever human tradition was elevated, God's word was denigrated.
[16:53] And as the authority and understanding of God's word decreases, human traditions take more and more and more of an importance. So whose voice then are you listening to?

Are you looking to merely human voices to tell you whether or not you're clean and acceptable? Or are you looking to God's word?
The influencers on social media your peers at work or at school the great intellectuals of our day none of these can really define what's clean or unclean.
Only God can. And that's a greatly liberating message. You don't have to listen to the constant noise of voices around you trying to tell you how to be okay and how to be the real you and how to be significant.
You don't have to keep up with the constantly changing fads of the world in order to be whole. They can't really define what's clean or unclean. Only God can.
[18:15] So what does God say? Where does real uncleanness come from? That brings us to the second point of our passage. In verses 14 through 23 Jesus tells us where real uncleanness comes from.

Verse 14 And he called the people to him again and said to them, Hear me all of you and understand. There's 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. Now at first this kind of confuses the disciples. They think it's kind of a parable, right?
It's a little confusing. Okay, Jesus, it's not the food that we eat. It's the food that comes out. What do you mean? Right? But Jesus says, no, no, no, no, no.
What I mean is, it's not what goes into your mouth that defiles you. It's what comes out of your heart. The real problem isn't foods or washings or anything outside of you.
[19:22] The real problem is inside of you. And it's inside of me, too. Now the truth is, friends, this passage should disturb us.

We are used to hearing today that if we just get in touch with our deepest feelings or learn to listen to what our heart is truly telling us, then we will find our real identity.
Then we will discover happiness and fulfillment and wholeness. It's not the externals that define us. Yes, we agree with that, but then Jesus says, but it's not the internal either.
Jesus has something quite different to say. He says, getting in touch with your truest, deepest feelings won't sort you out. What if the feelings that most truly express who we currently are turn out to be murderous, adulterous, envious, foolish, arrogant, and all the rest?
The fact that we have these feelings down in our hearts doesn't mean that they're validated or true or right or good. On the contrary, it means we have a problem.
[20:45] A problem that runs right through us. One writer put it this way, there's a crack in the building which isn't just a bit of damaged stonework on the exterior, the whole structure is faulty.

Keeping external purity laws can be one way of papering over the crack, but so can quote, getting in touch with your feelings. If there's evil, it infects the whole.
You see, in the Bible, the human heart that Jesus references a number of times in this passage, it's the center of your personality in the Bible. It's sort of the wellspring of your thoughts and your feelings and your actions.
Jesus is telling us here that it's as if deep down in that central part of who we are, there's a computer virus running amok and it's churning out code after code after code that begin with what Jesus calls in verse 21, evil thoughts or evil intentions.
It's as if there's this self-centered bent in everything that we do. And after those evil intentions, Jesus lists six nouns that in the Greek are all actually plural.

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[22:09] The first six after evil thoughts, evil intentions, they're all in the plural as if to describe evil actions. Acts of sexual immorality, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of avarice or coveting, malicious acts.

And then those six plural nouns, those evil acts, are followed by six nouns in the singular as if to say, here are the evil attitudes, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.
Notice there's a bit of a progression here, isn't there? From intention or desire to actions and then finally into settled attitudes or habits.
So what is Jesus telling us then? Is he telling us that everything is hopeless? That humans are just awful and we should give up?
No. He's telling us that what we need above all else isn't merely clean hands but clean hearts.
[23:26] that's why the Pharisees were so misguided. They thought that if they could just compile more and more traditions and regulations about external cleanliness they could really be cleaned.

But it was never going to work. I ran across an article this week by the jewelry designer Alex and Annie or Annie and Alex. Kim you know who I'm talking about right?
Alex and Annie and they said here's how you do a spiritual cleanse. They listed a few things. One was take a bath. The other was find some good crystals that you could sort of harness their energy. The other was sort of light some incense and do some herbal kind of incense around your room. The other was write down the name of all the people who've offended you and then burn it. Right?
Now none of those things are wrong right? I don't know about the crystal thing but you know those can all be relaxing or therapeutic. But it seems a little pharisaical doesn't it?
[24:30] More and more external practices to try to find an internal cleansing. But you know the other strategy that we try today is justice misguided. You know we tell people to follow their feelings and trust their heart and then they'll be whole.

But that can never work either. So what's the answer? How do we get a clean heart? Well you know the answer isn't actually found in our passage this morning per se.
In this passage Jesus only diagnoses the problem. And the problem is more radical than we could have ever imagined isn't it? You know it's so easy for us to think about external things we need to change to be okay.
But Jesus is saying you've got to go much deeper than that. But there is a hint in our passage that points to the answer that the rest of Mark's gospel gives.
There's a hint. Did you notice at the end of verse 19 how Mark gives this little editorial comment? He says, thus Jesus declared all foods clean.
[25:41] It's such a short little statement that we miss how radical it is. After all, do you see what Jesus just did in this passage? Mark underlines it for us at the end of verse 19 with this little parenthetical aside.

For thousands of years God had taught the people of Israel that some foods were clean and some were unclean and it mattered a lot which ones you ate and didn't eat. And by doing so God was teaching his people that they needed to be holy and clean and set apart in order to be in his presence, in order to be his people.
But now in an instant Jesus declares all foods are clean. Just like that. Isn't that amazing? After just excoriating the Pharisees for elevating human tradition above God's word, Jesus comes and says, I'm telling you all foods are clean.
Tells you a little something about who Jesus thought he was, doesn't it? Now that I'm here, Jesus is saying, the purity laws are reaching their fulfillment.
Under the old covenant, Jesus is saying, my father taught you about your need to be made clean. clean. But now, all that is coming to its fulfillment, to its goal.
[26:58] What those clean laws were meant to teach you, what they were meant to point to, it's here. The Old Testament spoke of purity and set up the laws as signposts to it.

But now Jesus was offering the reality. Does that mean the laws were worthless or pointless? No. Not at all. Think about it.
If you arrive at a destination, you don't need the signposts anymore, right, that lead you there. But that's not because the signposts were wrong, but because they've led you to the right place.
The signposts did their job and they were good. But now that you're there, you don't need them anymore. The clean laws were pointing to Jesus the whole time.

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You see, this is where Jesus and the Pharisees perhaps most profoundly differed. The Pharisees saw the Old Testament primarily as a book of rules that needed to be explained and applied through an ever-increasing body of human traditions and regulations.
[28:08] But the Old Testament isn't primarily a code of behavior. God's word primarily is a story which leads to Jesus as its fulfillment.

Yes, God does give us laws and they're good. But we don't get clean through an ever-increasing list of regulations. We get clean through the person of Jesus.
Not through what we do or don't do, but through what Jesus has done. But how does that work? Jesus was able to fulfill the purity laws of the Old Testament because he was the ultimate sacrifice that makes us clean.
When God became a human being in Jesus Christ, he was able in his humanity to take all of our dirt and all of our stains and all of our guilt and shame and he was able to take them and bear them up on the cross.
In love, he took the place of everyone who would admit their uncleanness and trust in him. And when he died in our place, all of our spiritual uncleanness died with him.
[29:33] That unclean heart that we all have stopped beating when Jesus was put in the grave. But then, three days later, he rose.

A new thing was born on Easter Sunday in our humanity coming out of the tomb. The apostle Paul says he rose for our justification.
You see, a new covenant was now in place. The old covenant that God set up through Moses was now fulfilled by Jesus. All its demands had been obeyed. All its penalties had been paid.
Now, the only thing that was left to do was simply to trust in the one who had done it for you. This is the new covenant in Jesus Christ. You and I give him your sinful heart and in return he gives you a new heart.
A heart of flesh filled with his spirit that beats for him in the power of his resurrection. Now, that doesn't mean that you'll never struggle with sin as a Christian.
[30:48] Christians will battle with sin until the day we meet Christ in glory. But what it does mean is that sin's power won't rule over you. There's a new principle now at work in you.

Working out not evil practices and evil attitudes but putting you on a trajectory of righteousness and truth and justice. Because you've been made new.
Because you've been made whole. Because Christ has made you clean. And if that's true of you in Christ then you won't need the external voices of human customs or traditions to validate you.
What a wonderful thing to not have to live according to the ever-changing attitudes and customs and traditions of a world that can't quite figure out what it thinks. And it also means that you won't need to search your internal voices of your heart either.
You don't have to go on some hunt to find the real you deep in the swirling desires of your own psyche. Because you're rooted in something much more sure and lasting and secure.
[32:05] You've found your identity in God's word and God's son alive and active in you through God's spirit. And that's the cleanness, that's the wholeness that you and I were made for.

Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, we take a moment in the stillness here together gathered as your people to confess that we not only have unclean hands but we have unclean hearts.
Lord, we don't like admitting this. We don't like admitting that we need a solution that goes as deep as our very heart. And yet, Father, we thank you that this is the very solution you've provided in Christ.
We pray that by your spirit you would be doing your work in our hearts that changes from the inside out by your grace.
Father, for those who are here this morning who are still considering Christianity, considering the claims of Jesus to be Lord, to be the real cleanser, God, I pray that you would help them to see Christ in all of his beauty and to trust in him.
[33:42] Father, and for those that you have drawn to yourself, into your family, into your church, for those who you've given this new birth in this clean heart, God, I pray that we would continue to put sin to death and walk in paths of righteousness for your namesake.

Lord, and help us as a church to be guided always and ever by your word. To not let human traditions or customs drive us by fear or by pride, but to let your word always do its work in our midst, leading us and guiding us into all truth.

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We pray this, Father, in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen.

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