

The Real Jesus | The One With Food Traditions of the Pharisees (Mark 7:1-23)

July 17, 2022 | Matthew McNutt

[Title Slide] It's time for a serious conversation about handwashing. We haven't spoken about that enough over the last few years, right? Let's be real, your hands are disgusting cesspools of disease and filth. Seriously.

A few years back, we did a middle school event here at the church and at the end of the night there was a half-finished bag of Doritos still left. I love Doritos. They're amazing. So, I took them home, where my wife then asked if she could have some. Problem was, I wanted all of them. I love her, but I really love Doritos, y'know? Desperation triggered inspiration, so I said, "Sure, but I feel I need to let you know that I have no idea how many middle school dudes stuck their hands in this bag. And you have to wonder, how many of them washed their hands after going to the bathroom?" She was like, "Ew, what's wrong with you? That's disgusting, I don't want any."

Sweet victory. Until I went to reach in for a chip ... and paused. I had grossed myself out, too, because I know those boys, and there is no way they had washed their hands. I had to throw away the bag.

What does all this have to do with the Bible? I'm glad you asked.

Mark 7:1-2 (NLT)¹ *One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. ² They noticed that some of his disciples failed to follow the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating.*

First off, of course the disciples weren't washing their hands. Other than Peter, they were all teenagers¹, and hand washing is not something teen guys are generally known for [[Rabbi's typically recruited disciples around the age of 15-18 years old and Jesus seems to have followed that pattern](#)]. But is that what this was really about?

Not in the way we think of it. This was not about hygiene; they weren't worried about germs or things like that in the way that shapes our concerns around washing hands today. It was an issue of spiritual purity.² The ritual in question was a simple one requiring a small amount of water to run over and through their fingers as they cupped their hands before eating – especially if they had been in places like the market where non-Jewish people not following their purity practices would have been engaged.

Mark 7:5-15 (NLT)⁵ *So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony."*

¹ Ray Vander Laan, Stephen Sorenson, and Amanda Sorenson, *In the Dust of the Rabbi: 5 Faith Lessons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 25.

² *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 1639.

At some point during the pandemic, the phrase, “hygiene theater”³ was coined to describe people – and more often businesses and organizations - going way beyond what was necessary or even effective to clean and sanitize for covid. It gave a sense of security but didn’t actually do anything to prevent the spread of covid. That’s kind of what was going on with these Pharisees and religious leaders. They even made a benediction about it:

“Blessed be Thou O Lord, King of the universe, who sanctified us by thy laws and commanded us to wash the hands.”⁴

Plot twist: these hand-washing ceremonies that they were requiring everyone to do weren’t actually commanded by God for the people; in fact, according to scripture, only the priests were required to do this ceremony before entering the Tabernacle.⁵ The pharisees took these priestly requirements and applied them to everyone in a mistaken belief that if they went way beyond what God required, then they were in no danger of being impure.⁶ Almost like a protective fence around what the Bible specified – as long as you don’t cross the fence, then you’re definitely not in danger of violating God’s requirements.

The problem was, they were trying to legislate purity, and in so doing making following God a burden instead of a joy and gift.

More importantly, Jesus recognized that hand washing wasn’t even the real issue.

“Jesus replied, ‘You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’ Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.’ For you ignore God’s law and substitute your own tradition.”

Jesus had harsh language for them. He’s essentially saying they are just giving lip service to God but that in reality their hearts are far from Him; they have put their made-up rules on the level of God’s commandments – a dangerous thing to do!⁷

THEY SUBSTITUTED THEIR TRADITIONS FOR GOD’S WORD⁸

Which sounds wild to me. How could they ever get to that point? And yet ... how many of us have elevated our desires, our opinions, our actions, over the Word of God? How

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hygiene_theater

⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), Kindle location 4047.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001), Kindle location 3347.

⁷ Ibid, Kindle location 3360.

⁸ Ibid.

many of us have felt spiritually superior while ignoring areas of our lives we know are in contradiction with God's Word? Let's see how Jesus responds to it:

⁹ Then he said, "You skillfully sidestep God's law in order to hold on to your own tradition. ¹⁰ For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.'

The Pharisees claimed that their extra biblical laws had a chain of tradition that went all the way back to Moses, so Jesus cites Moses and the giving of the fifth commandment to show just how wrong they were.⁹ And to make sure they remember the seriousness of the fifth commandment, Jesus cites the law requiring the death sentence for those who break the fifth commandment (Leviticus 20:9, Exodus 21:17).

¹¹ But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, 'Sorry, I can't help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.' ¹² In this way, you let them disregard their needy parents. ¹³ And so you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition. And this is only one example among many others."

CORBAN

The Greek word used for vow in this passage is **Corban**, which refers to a very specific type of vow. Essentially, it was a type of vow in which a person dedicated their money to God – but didn't have to actually give it to God – there was no time constraint to the vow.¹⁰ In other words, all they had to do was say the word **Corban** and going forward they could refuse to help their parents because their resources were vowed to God and it would be wrong to violate that sacred purpose; but they could also still keep the money and use it for themselves. And even if they felt bad about it later, there was such a huge cultural honor system about vows that they were never allowed to go back on it!

This **Corban** vow was not a biblical vow, but the principle of keeping a vow is in scripture. So, they were regularly using a man-made concept to nullify one of God's commandments and justifying it by saying God commanded them to keep vows. But in what world are we supposed to rationalize our actions with the idea that God would want us to use one biblical commandment to cancel out another one?

These actions say far more about their hearts than they realized.

And here's the thing; we do it today, don't we? What have you declared **Corban**? What have you promised to give to God ... just not yet? God, you can have my resources, once I get that raise. God, you can have my honesty and integrity, once I get that

⁹ Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, Kindle location 4119.

¹⁰ *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 1639.

promotion, once I close that deal, once I win this case. God, you can have my time, once I get through this season. God you can have my purity ... later; I'll stop looking at these websites when I'm older, when I'm married, when I have time to deal with it. God, you can have all of my heart, just not yet. God, let me make this **Corban** vow to you. And we feel good because we're going to do what we know we need to do eventually. How often do those **Corban** vows, those vows we make to fulfill someday actually pan out, though?

It's not just these ancient hearts that are being revealed, is it? It says far more about what we value and where our hearts are as well.

¹⁴ Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. "All of you listen," he said, "and try to understand. ¹⁵ It's not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart."

THE HEART IS KEY

Jesus was expanding what it meant to be clean or unclean before God; all of the traditions around food and washing that they had were to illustrate a deeper principle, that it is our heart that counts in God's eyes. Methodical observance of purity rituals is powerless to accomplish a heart that honors God.¹¹ But here's the thing: this teaching from Jesus doesn't lessen God's demand for purity – it actually calls us to a righteousness beyond what the Pharisees strove for!¹² To move beyond **Corban** vows to heart transformation.

Mark 7:17-23 (NLT) ¹⁷ Then Jesus went into a house to get away from the crowd, and his disciples asked him what he meant by the parable he had just used. ¹⁸ "Don't you understand either?" he asked.

Just more proof that these were a bunch of young guys who didn't get it. Seriously, though, there was a lot of cultural baggage tied up around these purity codes and food rules. Jesus was challenging what generations had taught and accepted as truth.

"Can't you see that the food you put into your body cannot defile you? ¹⁹ Food doesn't go into your heart, but only passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer." (By saying this, he declared that every kind of food is acceptable in God's eyes.)

²⁰ And then Jesus added, "It is what comes from inside that defiles you. ²¹ For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. ²³ All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you."

¹¹ Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, Kindle location 4190.

¹² Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Kindle location 3450.

Holiness does not depend on rituals.¹³ Dr. William Lane writes in his commentary on Mark, “The capacity for fellowship with God is not destroyed by material uncleanness of food or hands; it is destroyed by personal sin.”¹⁴

It’s easy to look back at these ancient people and see where they went wrong but miss how this is a warning to us as well. It is far easier to see the error in someone else than ourselves, isn’t it? And the thing is, there were some good motives behind what these religious leaders taught:

1. A desire for Israel to be holy to the Lord.
2. The intent to deter the pagan influences that surrounded them.
3. The assumption their teaching was based on God’s principles.¹⁵

We can fall into that same pattern; a desire to be holy and to deter the unchristian influences around us. The challenge is that it is so much easier to go after an appearance of holiness than to do the actual work of heart change. And the assumptions that steered them so wrong two thousand years ago can steer us wrong today.

When we feel spiritual superiority because we wear the right clothes, say the right words, look the part on Sunday morning, cling to traditions – are we Baptists more than we are Christians? Do we feel good about ourselves because we check all the right boxes at church, so that makes up for how we’re known at work, the homework and tests we cheated on, the websites we looked at, the way we treated that person the other day? Like God has some sort of cosmic scale and my helping in VBS will outweigh me pocketing some things from work? I mean, come on, they don’t pay me what I’m worth, right?

Mark 7:21-23 (NLT) ²¹“For from within, out of a person’s heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. ²³ All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you.”

We like the measurables. We can measure church attendance, we can measure service, we can keep track of good deeds. And those things can impress other people. But Jesus is driving home the point that none of that means anything to God if there are evil thoughts under the surface, sexual immorality, adultery, if there is theft of any kind, violent desires, selfishness, lying, lustful desires, jealousy, slander or gossip about others, pride, foolishness – yeah, Jesus covered all the bases with this list.

¹³ Ibid, Kindle location 3391.

¹⁴ Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, Kindle location 4248.

¹⁵ David E. Garland, *Mark: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 279-280.

Somehow sexual related issues made it three times, probably because He really knows our hearts.

We're good at minimizing our own sin, it's not that bad. People need to understand the circumstances. The Bible tells us ideals, but that's not always realistic in the day to day. We rationalize making **Corban** vows with these issues; I'm so good at washing my hands, I can worry about this deceit later. We forget that what we have with God is a relationship, that our holding back, our sin is an adultery against Him. Donald Miller alludes to this in his book, "Searching for God Knows What"¹⁶:

I've a friend who overheard his wife on the phone with another man. She did not know he was in the house, and he walked up behind her, leaned against the frame of the door to hear her confess her love and enjoyment of the other man's touch. My friend drove around Baltimore in a daze; he went into coffee shops and sat with his head in his hands. He went to a bus station and bought a ticket to Pittsburgh but he missed his bus, sick from smoking a pack of cigarettes. Instead, he spent an hour in the bathroom vomiting yellow muck into a filthy toilet.

Our systematic theology reduces the fall of man to a technical act of betrayal. We hardly think of it as relational at all. But I think this view distorts what actually happened. I think God must have felt like my friend in Baltimore. I think it was something terribly painful for God to endure. I don't think we can understand the pain a pure love would feel after being betrayed by the focus of its love. You wouldn't think God would forgive them at all. You would think God would just kill them.

It makes sense that the things in our heart defile us. When the man heard what he heard, all the hand washing, all the good things became meaningless, didn't it? When he discovered what was in her heart, it changed how everything else was perceived.

In Luke, Jesus speaks about this;

Luke 6:45 (NLT) A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.

WHAT IS IN YOUR HEART?

What is in the treasury of your heart, invalidating the good that you do? What have you rationalized away, dismissed, made **Corban** because you've given so much else to God that this one thing doesn't matter?

¹⁶ Donald Miller, *Searching for God Knows What* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 83.

Write it down. Text someone and tell them you need to get together to pray about something and bring them into the loop. Put it on your connection card and drop it in the box.

WHAT IS IN YOUR HEART WILL FLOW OUT

Because as much as you may believe you have buried, as much as you may think you have hidden it away, what is in your heart will flow out. Maybe it hasn't yet, but the day is coming.

Those evil thoughts, that sexual sin, that violence to others – whether physical or only fantasized, that selfishness, the lies, the jealousy, the pride, the foolishness – whatever it is, will burst out of your heart at some point if it isn't already. **Corban** vows always catch up to us.

You need to change what you feed your heart. That's why telling someone else is so critical, to have that accountability, to have someone alongside you as you fill your heart with God's word, God's love, God's desires. It is only there where our hearts find peace, rest, joy, purpose. It transforms our lives.

Close in prayer.