

Traditions, Commandments, Cleanliness, & God

BIBLE STUDY OF MARK 7:1-23

A QUESTION OF 'CLEANNESS' - Mark 7:1-5

Read Mark 7:1-5.

[1] Who questioned Jesus about His disciples' actions?

[2] What was troubling them?

[3] Why were these actions a problem to these people?

[4] What was the basis of their definition of appropriate behavior?

Again we have the Pharisees and teachers of the law from Jerusalem [compare Mark 3:22] voicing criticism of Jesus. Although the criticism here is against His disciples, what a Rabbi's disciples do reflects on their Rabbi.

Their contention is not based on the Law of Moses [Genesis to Deuteronomy] but on 'the tradition of the elders' [7:5], which was an attempt to break up the Law of Moses down into hundreds of small detailed rules and regulations. In addition, their contention about the disciples' actions was not aimed at their breaking a moral law, but at their breaking a ritual, ceremonial law. Nor were they criticizing the faith of the disciples, but their ritual uncleanness.

JESUS' ANSWER – Mark 7:6-23

Read Mark 7:6-8.

[1] What did Jesus call the Pharisees and teachers of the law?

[2] List the four accusing contrasts that Jesus used to justify this:

The word 'hypocrite' - hupocrites – refers to an 'actor', a person playing an assumed role, a counterfeit. It is used twenty times in the New Testament – all in the synoptic gospels, and all spoken by Jesus. Thirteen of these are directed against the teachers of the Law and/or the Pharisees. Several others refer to anyone whose religious actions are done deliberately to impress others. The over-riding theme of these references in context is the uselessness of such religion before God and the terrible and inevitable judgement that awaits those whose religion is mere outward show.

Quoting Isaiah 29:13, Jesus defends His reference to the Pharisees and teachers of the law as 'hypocrites'. He says:

Although they honor God with what they say, their hearts are far away from God.

Although they worship God, it is without meaning.

Although they teach, they are teaching not God's rules, but men's.

They have let go the commands of God and hold on to the traditions of men.

Beyond the pretense of hypocrisy is the deeper issue identified in the third and fourth accusations. This substitution of human traditions, human rules, human practice for the Word of God has been with us since Genesis 3. The great Reformers of the sixteenth century sought to bring Christianity back to the Word of God, with their slogans of Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, and Christ alone. Christianity is constantly relying for yet another band of faithful believers to recall Christians back to those same foundations, back to the Word of God and away from human additions to or corruptions of that Word.

[1] To what extent are these four accusations made by Jesus applicable to contemporary Christianity?

[2] List evidence of contemporary Christianity's substitution of human traditions, perceptions or experience for the sure and unchanging Word of God.

A specific example – Mark 7:10-13

Read Mark 7:10-13.

In these verses Jesus at first says that they set aside the commands of God in order to observe their own traditions [verse 10], and concludes by saying that they nullify the word of God by their tradition [verse 13].

Both of these are serious accusations. In putting aside the commands of God in order to keep their traditions they have actually made the word of God null and void. They have disempowered the Word of God. They have treated it as nothing. And why? Because they were more concerned about their own human traditions and practices than they were about the real word of God.

In the example of their behavior that Jesus gives, they have excused themselves from keeping the actual command of God 'Honor your father and your mother' on the basis of an oral tradition which allowed them to let their parents starve because they had made a vow to give their money to God. They justify the selfishness and heartlessness of their attitude by a spurious outward expression of devotion to God.

Jesus adds: 'And you do many things like that.'

[1] Search your own heart and life. Are there any ways in which you use your 'religion' as an excuse to justify your disobedience to the clear commands of the written Word of God?

[2] Analyze St. Paul. To what extent, and for what actions or teachings, could Jesus' accusation in verse 13 be held against us?

The human heart – Mark 7:14-23

Read Mark 7:14-23.

The criticism raised by the Pharisees and teachers of the law against Jesus' disciples focused on ritual/ceremonial cleanness. Jesus' response, now addressing the crowd, takes up this concept of 'uncleanness' and the question of what it is that makes a person 'unclean'. He makes two points:

That nothing going into a person from the outside makes him 'unclean'.

Rather, it is what comes out of a person that makes him 'unclean'.

In explaining this to His disciples He taught them:

Anything physically unclean that goes into the body, enters the stomach, and is eliminated from the body. It does not have the ability to make that person spiritually 'unclean'.

It is what comes from within a person, from a person's heart [and is expressed in his attitudes, words and actions] that makes a person spiritually 'unclean'.

[1] Make a list of everything Jesus mentions that come from a person's heart and make that person 'unclean'.

[2] What is Jesus' one-word summary of all of these things?

[3] What is the significance of Jesus' inclusion of relatively 'little sins' such as 'folly' beside really 'big sins' like 'murder'?

[4] In what way does Jesus' teaching here outlaw any human attempt to blame other people, or circumstances, or evil spirits or Satan for their sin?

This brief teaching, with its inclusion of a wide range of sins, exposes us all as 'unclean'. No amount of ritual washing can eradicate this for it is not an external uncleanness. It is an inner uncleanness. Nor can any amount of verbal confession or public worship cover-up this inner uncleanness [verse 6,7]. Sin has corrupted us inside.

What do these scriptures teach about the human heart?

[1] Jeremiah 5:23:

[2] Jeremiah 17:9:

[3] Matthew 12:34:

[4] Matthew 23:27:

[5] Romans 1:21:

[6] Romans 2:5:

[7] Romans 7:18:

[8] Ephesians 4:18:

[9] Ezekiel 36:26:

The last of the above references mentions not only the hardness of the human heart but also the remedy.

Conclusion

The next and unsettling question is how is your heart? Is it like mine? Mine is appalling, and rather unpleasant, wicked and full of restless trouble, it needs forgiveness every waking hour, and even in sleep it is not guiltless. Take some time and peel back the blind spot the world places over your heart, have a good look at it. The world says - people are essentially good, and yet we know that's not true. The world says, you're not as bad as the next guy, and yet you know that's not true.

The good news for you today is that God has a heart - and His heart, the one that beats in Jesus' chest, is without blemish: It is perfect and unstained. His love for you is pure, and good, and without sin. Jesus gave His heart, and everything that went with it, to you: He gave every drop of His blood for you, every ounce of His being for you when He died upon the cross. In His holiness, He held nothing back. He was dedicated to His Father and yet He showed you mercy. He didn't keep His goodness for Himself, He gives it to you. When He forgives you He gives you a heart transplant - He puts His heart where your heart beats. And He does this each and every time you come to Him for forgiveness. Even in those times when you feel stuck between a rock and a hard place, when you are in the deepest, darkest, blackest of holes, when you are swimming in sin and drowning in it, Jesus gives you His heart. You are not required to give yours to Him. In fact, as soon as you've given your heart to Him you can be sure He's already given His to you, try as you might you cannot beat Jesus to it. He will give you what you need. And on the Last Day, when you are raised up, the heart you have will be once for all fully transformed and it will never again have even on sin in it, not one sinful thought, not one sinful desire. It will be washed clean and made new for all time. Jesus will do this for you. Jesus, "who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself." [Philippians 3:21]