

Mark 7:14-23 Right Heart, Not Right Ritual

14 After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, “Listen to Me, all of you, and understand:

Jesus invites the crowd to join the discussion that He is having with the scribe and pharisee delegation to the entire crowd, as a teaching opportunity for them. The accusation of the scribes and pharisees has been rebutted, and now Jesus takes the initiative to teach Israel a much more fundamental issue of purity which goes far beyond the limited question of the validity of the scribal rules for hand washing.

15 there is nothing outside the person which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which come out of the person are what defile the person.”

This pronouncement that there is nothing outside a person which can defile a person, being taken in by eating (and, of course this includes the specific case of eating with un-ritualistically cleaned hands, as had been the concern of the pharisees and scribes who had been accusing Him), must have shocked not only the scribes and pharisees, but all the people as well. There were dozens of purity laws having to do with food, and which foods were clean and unclean, as well as many having to do with other aspects of food and drink. It was such laws, firmly rooted in the Torah, that would come to a Jewish mind on hearing Jesus’ words.

Matthew 15:10-12 details not only that Jesus is speaking about the lack of importance of the ritual purity of food here, compared to personal decision-making about our thoughts, words and actions, but also His direct confrontation of the Pharisees, and their reaction. **10 After Jesus called the crowd to Him, He said to them, “Hear and understand! 11 It is not what enters the mouth that defiles the person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles the person.”12 Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?”** So, of course, these rule-keeping Pharisees, so dedicated to the law, had a big problem with this. Keeping the law was what they dedicated their lives to, and Jesus was telling them that it was worthless, compared to keeping their thoughts, speech, and conduct pure. Jesus is concerned about the impurity, and foulness coming out of their mouths, not what they’re eating. And, if they would not change and understand that God wanted a relationship with them based on love for Him in their hearts, not following a set of rules, then they would not be part of the Kingdom of God. He continued in Matthew 15:13-14” **13 But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant will be uprooted. 14 Leave them alone; they are blind guides of blind people. And if a person who is blind guides another who is blind, both will fall into a pit.”** It’s our hearts that count, and if rule-keeping is all that our relationship with God is all about, then we’re just fooling ourselves, and if we allow ourselves to be lead by those who are similarly blind, then both we and our guides will fall into a pit, and perish.

17 And when He later entered a house, away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him about the parable. 18 And He said to them, “Are you so lacking in understanding as well? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the person from outside cannot defile him,

So, the disciples decided not to display their ignorance in front of the crowd; instead waiting until Jesus was inside a house before asking Him what He meant by this amazing statement that He had just made. Remember that the disciples had been taught by the Pharisees, so they thought that the Pharisees had taught them correctly. Jesus was having to teach them to unlearn some of the false ideas about God that they had been taught, and to re-orient them to a proper relationship with God. What differentiates them is not an inherent ability to grasp spiritual truth, but the fact that they are privileged to receive special instruction from Jesus. The lesson here, is that we must not depend on our intellect, or our innate abilities, or even our training or instruction from others, but upon God teaching us directly, in our case through the power of His Holy Spirit.

19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (Thereby He declared all foods clean.)

The new element in Jesus’ interpretation is the specific reference to “the heart.” In Semitic expression the heart is the center of human personality, will, and decision making, which determines man’s entire action and inaction. This key to the statement in verse 15 was already mentioned when Jesus quoted Isa. 29:13: **“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”** Jesus makes it clear that He traces the source of defilement to the heart, and shows that in an ultimate sense “food” and “the heart” have nothing to do with each other. It is particularly with the heart that a person relates to God, and any purported relationship with God which bypasses the heart is a mockery—which is what the Pharisees were trying to do, by instead keeping the letter of the law. Jesus, Mark tells us, thereby cleansed all food, in the sense of declaring that it is no longer to be regarded as ritually ‘unclean’.

Yet, even the disciples still had a problem getting away from the dietary laws that they were brought up with as Jews. They still had a problem with experiencing the freedom that God wanted to give them. We see this with Peter in Acts 10:9-17. God literally had to tell Peter 3 times, and he still didn’t get the fact that God was removing these laws from His people. Why was this? There were two reasons.

First, the Jewish dietary laws, and many of the other laws, such as the keeping of Sabbath, were designed to make them a separate people. Additionally, there were laws regarding them marrying only within the Jewish population, and mostly within their own tribes, due to land rights being associated with tribes. All of this meant that they had to keep careful genealogies to ensure that they were keeping covenant with God, and also for the purposes of inheritance. This was so that, when the Messiah Jesus came, there would be a separate people Israel for Him to be born into, and a line of Abraham, and of David that He could prove His descent from, according to the records that were kept in the Temple in Jerusalem. Once Jesus came, and the gospels were written, there was no need for Israel to keep this separation anymore.

The second reason was that the separation of Jew and Gentile impeded the Gospel Continuing in Acts, 10, verse we see that God directed Peter to enter the home of Cornelius, the centurion **22 They said, “Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you.” 23 So he invited them in and gave them lodging.** So, he entered His house, as he would not usually as a Jew. And, we find out why in verses 27-28 **27 As he talked with him, he entered and *found many people assembled. 28 And he said to them, “You yourselves know that it is forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a foreigner; and yet God has shown me that I am not to call any person unholy or unclean.** And, so Peter had to be brought to the point that He realized that Gentiles were being accepted for salvation by the Lord. And, in Acts 15, it was decided not to burden the gentiles with a bunch of rules that the Jews had been unable themselves to keep. And, so the ruling of the Jerusalem Council who decided the issue was that Acts 15:29 **“You must abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality”.** The idea was not that Jews and Gentiles would remain separate, but that the **wall of separation**, as Paul put it, would be removed. The prohibition against food sacrificed to idols was that in the ancient world, food offered to idols was often consumed in pagan temple meals or sold in markets. For Gentile Christians, eating such food could be seen as participating in idolatry, especially if it was part of a ritual meal. Since this was sometimes the only source for meat for the poor, it was a temptation. While the Jerusalem Council’s letter was a practical guideline, the Apostle Paul later addressed the matter in 1 Corinthians 8–10. He taught that: Idols are “nothing” in reality (1 Cor 8:4), so eating food offered to idols is not inherently sinful. However, if eating such food would cause a “weaker”

believer to stumble or be led into sin, a stronger believer should voluntarily abstain out of love (1 Cor 8:9–13). Paul also warned against participating in pagan feasts, as they could imply fellowship with demons (1 Cor 10:20–21). The idea was the unity of the Church, with all those bought by the blood to live together in harmony. The disciples could have started eating bacon cheeseburgers right away, but instead they waited for years later to enjoy all that God had cleansed, and enjoy the freedom bought by Christ at the cross to the greatest extent. But, the whole key is faith in Jesus' work of cleansing, propitiating, redeeming, justifying and atoning work on the cross, and not putting your faith in keeping a bunch of rules.

20 And He was saying, "That which comes out of the person, that is what defiles the person.

21 For from within, out of the hearts of people, come the evil thoughts, acts of sexual immorality, thefts, murders, acts of adultery, 22 deeds of greed, wickedness, deceit, indecent behavior, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within and defile the person."

--Now, Jesus addresses the importance of decision-making in thought, word, and deed, stressing the importance of 'what comes out' of a man. Unlike the things which do not defile because they do not make contact with the heart, the really defiling things are those which actually originate in the heart, and are allowed to burst forth, because of the abundance of them in the heart. Evil thoughts, or 'evil machinations', planning against people, and against God's purposes heads the list. This is the "working of iniquity", especially when it is followed by action, that the Bible says so much against. Then there are a list of vices that follows, some of which are expressed as actions rather than thoughts or words, but all of which originate in the heart, the seat of thought and will. All these vices are therefore inward making their way outward, and thus represent the real character of the person from whom they issue. Mark's list ranges far and wide.

acts of sexual immorality, thefts, murders, acts of adultery, 22 deeds of greed, wickedness, deceit, indecent behavior, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within and defile the person." This is not an exhaustive list, but rather some of the more common ways in which evil thoughts are manifested in human conduct. Fornication is a broad term covering all acts of sexual immorality; it is wider than adultery, which presupposes the breach of the marriage bond, and "licentiousness," which carries the nuance of open immorality. Theft, murder and adultery occur side by side in the decalogue and in Hos. 4:2. "Acts of coveting" may include deeds committed in lust since this word is frequently associated with other terms denoting sexual sins. "Wickedness" appears to be a general term denoting acts of deliberate malice.

"Deceit" implies the components of cunning and treachery. "An evil eye" is a Semitic expression for stinginess or for that grudging jealousy with which a man looks upon the possessions of another. "Railing" can refer to "slander" directed toward a man, but in the OT it always describes an affront to the majesty of God, and a more accurate translation would be "blasphemy." "Pride" carries the nuance of arrogance which expresses itself in self-appraisal. The final word, 'foolishness' may not seem to us to be a moral failure in the same category as the rest. In OT wisdom literature, however, the 'fool' is regularly bracketed with the 'wicked', and his foolishness consists in his wrong attitude to God which prevents him from knowing how to behave properly; These acts and dispositions, Jesus affirms, are what defile a man and they have their source in a heart which is in open rebellion against God. This explanation places the question of defilement and purity on a fundamentally different level than that presupposed by the scribes and Pharisees. By this interpretation Jesus does not alleviate the demand for purity but sharpens it. The capacity for fellowship with God is not destroyed by material uncleanness of food or hands; it is destroyed by personal sin.