

# Inside vs. Outside

Mark 7:14-23

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We've all met people we would describe as having no filter. These people say and do things that seem wildly out of place or shocking to those around them. Children are notorious for having no filter. Many children don't realize that the questions they ask or the things they say may be hurtful to other people. Most of us with kids have had the experience of our children saying something and being mortified as we hear it coming out of their mouths.

Many today wear the fact that they operate with no filter as a badge of honor, proudly saying whatever they are thinking regardless of how it might affect others. Most people, however, operate with at least some form of filter in place. The reason filters exist is to remove things that shouldn't be there in the first place. You use a furnace filter to remove contaminants from the air. You use a coffee filter to prevent the coffee grounds from getting into your cup. And we filter our speech and our actions to remove things we know are inappropriate. Some of the thoughts we have aren't good, so we know we shouldn't give voice to them. Jesus points out that while it's good for us to filter what's on the outside, if we neglect what's on the inside, we're really no better off.

Last week, we saw how the Pharisees attacked Jesus and His disciples because they didn't follow the laws that were part of the oral tradition of the Jews. The Pharisees were upset because Jesus and His disciples didn't wash their hands before eating like they did. But Jesus pointed out to them that while they were intently focused on following their manmade rules, they were actually far from the Lord. This morning, we will look at what Jesus said to the gathered crowd after this encounter and His explanation of that to the disciples. What Jesus had to say was revolutionary for the time, and it remains an important, if difficult concept for us to grasp today.

## Jesus' Speech to the Crowd

Last week we looked at Jesus' response to the Pharisees, but this week we will look at what Jesus said to the crowd immediately after. Listen to what He said,

<sup>14</sup> Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. "All of you listen," he said, "and try to understand. <sup>15</sup> It's not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart." (Mark 7:14-15, NLT)

What Jesus said flew in the face of everything the Jews had come to believe. The Jews followed a strict dietary code which was laid out in God's law. They were not to eat meat from animals that were considered unclean, and this included animals like pigs, lizards, shellfish, and carrion birds. As such, most Jews were heavily focused on following these dietary restrictions. In the minds of most Jews, these restrictions were what separated them from the rest of the world. They believed their adherence to these rules were part of the reason they were acceptable to God and other nations were not.

The Jews understood that failing to follow God's laws, whether they were dietary laws or something else, would make a person "unclean" for a time. If you came into contact with a dead body, consumed something you shouldn't have, or came into contact with Gentiles, you would be declared unclean, and thus would have to be separated until you were made clean once more (often by following a cleansing ritual of some sort).

What Jesus says seems to go against this deeply ingrained belief. Jesus said people are not defiled by what goes into their bodies, but what comes from their hearts. In other words, you are not made unclean by anything external, but only by what is inside! This statement certainly would have sounded to Jesus' Jewish audience like He was contradicting what God had said and setting Himself above God's law.

I believe this is why Jesus' disciples asked for an explanation when they were alone with Him. Jesus often said things to the crowds that were provocative and a bit enigmatic. The disciples, however, had the benefit of being able to go to Jesus directly and ask what He meant. And that's exactly what happened here.

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> "Don't you understand either?" he asked. "Can't you see that the food you put into your body cannot defile you? <sup>19</sup> 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.) (Mark 7:17-19, NLT)

The disciples wanted clarification because it seemed like Jesus was saying that the Jewish dietary restrictions were unnecessary...but how could that be?

Jesus didn't mince words with the disciples—He told them that their understanding was correct. He said the food you eat doesn't affect your heart. Obviously, we know that if you eat too many burgers and fries, it would be bad for your heart, but hopefully we also know that the heart that Jesus is talking about isn't the organ that pumps blood for us. He is speaking to something different—when Jesus speaks of the heart, He is speaking of our character, the core of who we are. Jesus' point is that food does not affect our character. Mark goes so far as to clarify this statement by answering the question they were all asking—was Jesus saying they did not need to follow the dietary laws? Mark says that's exactly what Jesus was saying.

This was a significant point of contention in the early Church. Despite Jesus' statements, many believed that a person must become a Jew in order to become a Christian. This meant following all the Jewish laws, including the dietary restrictions. Peter had an experience where God reiterated this message that nothing was unclean to him, and this changed everyone's view. People came to understand that a person didn't have to become Jewish to become a follower of Jesus. People didn't have to follow Jewish law to be saved—they just needed to follow Jesus. It released people from the demands of the dietary and ceremonial laws that the Jewish people held so dear. All that was needed was to follow Jesus.

But it still raises a question because the dietary laws were not manmade laws like the rules about handwashing. The dietary restrictions were given by God himself. So why would those laws suddenly cease to be binding? Did God change His mind? Was Jesus setting Himself up as superior to the Lord? These are valid questions.

God did not change His mind, and Jesus did not view Himself as greater than the Father. The goal of the dietary code was not to provide a means by which people could be made holy, but to point the people to what holiness looks like. It means standing apart from the world around you and doing what honors the Lord. These laws taught that concept, but they also pointed forward to a time when God would deliver His people once and for all. Jesus came to make all people clean, not just the Jews. The laws were given to teach a specific people a specific lesson at a specific time. Now that they had served their purpose, these laws could pass away. In fact, I believe Jesus was saying that they *needed* to pass away, because the people had become so focused on the laws themselves that they had neglected their relationship with God.

Jesus did not say that what people do doesn't matter. He wasn't eliminating all of God's law. But He was saying that these *ceremonial* laws were no longer necessary. This is why Christians today eat pork, shrimp, and other animals that would be considered unclean. It is the same reason we see no issue with wearing fabrics made up of two different types of fiber. And it's the same reason that Christians no longer celebrate many of the feasts or offer the sacrifices which God commanded of the Israelites in the Old Testament. We aren't cherry-picking which laws we want to follow and which we want to ignore; these ceremonial laws had served their purposes, therefore they were no longer needed. But the moral laws were still there to guide us in how to live.

Think about how significant of a change this would have been. For the Jews, much of their identity was tied up in the laws they followed. This was what made a Jewish person unique. But now Jesus was saying these laws were no longer necessary. He was changing their identity. It would have been an earth-shaking revelation.

## **Jesus' Second Explanation**

But Jesus didn't stop with just declaring that all food was acceptable in God's sight. That really wasn't His point—it was just an illustration of it. So, to keep people from missing the point, He gave a more direct explanation.

<sup>20</sup> And then he added, "It is what comes from inside that defiles you. <sup>21</sup> For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup> adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you." (Mark 7:20-23, NLT)

Jesus' point is that what is inside is most important. Then He gives a list of evil, sinful things, and points to the fact that each of these come from the heart. They don't come from eating certain foods or following certain rituals. They are a direct result of what is inside us.

Jesus gives a list of things that everyone in His audience agreed were sinful. Our society today doesn't seem to share the same convictions, so I think it's important to briefly examine the things Jesus condemns. They can be divided into two groups: the first group is evil actions, and the second is evil attitudes. Let's look at the actions first.

**Sexual immorality** refers to any perversion of God's plan for sex. God's design was for sex to be a part of the relationship between a husband and wife, and nowhere else. Any perversion of that plan is sin. **Theft** is taking something that doesn't belong to you. That can be physical objects, money, credit, or any number of other things. **Murder** is the taking of another person's life. Most of us do not think of ourselves as murderers, but in the sermon on the mount, Jesus pointed out that murder begins with an attitude of hatred, or of not valuing every human life. **Adultery** falls under the umbrella of sexual immorality, but it refers specifically to marital unfaithfulness. It is when a married person engages in sexual behaviors with someone they aren't married to. **Deceit** is any attempt to mislead other people or misrepresent the truth. We can engage in deceit by lying, omitting elements of the truth, or framing things in a way that leads people to false conclusions. **Slander** is when we speak in a way that tears other people down. It doesn't matter whether what we are saying is true, the primary issue is our intent. Slander intends to hurt others.

Jesus says all these actions have their genesis in the human heart, not something external. When people get caught up in these behaviors, they often say that "it just happened", but Jesus reminds us that isn't true. Each of these actions starts with our thoughts and desires.

And that's the other part of the list: sins of the mind. **Evil thoughts** come from allowing our minds to dwell on things we know are wrong. **Greed** is having an insatiable lust for more—whether that is for money, power, prestige, freedom, or something else. **Wickedness** is knowing what is right and good, but choosing to do what we know is wrong instead. **Lustful desires** can be thought of as sexual immorality of the mind. **Envy** is desiring something that someone else has—whether that is possessions, situations, positions, or power. **Pride** is thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought. **Foolishness** is any behavior that ignores God's word. It comes from choosing to remain willfully ignorant of what is right.

While it is important for us to understand that these behaviors and attitudes are evil (because many of them are celebrated by our society today), Jesus' point was that the issue we face is internal, not external. Sometimes we imagine that sins of the mind are no big deal. We believe it doesn't matter if we entertain sin in our hearts, because it's not hurting anyone. Jesus says otherwise. Jesus says those sins of the heart will ultimately translate into sinful actions.

It is far easier to make our focus some set of rules that we must keep rather than to doing the hard work of reflection, changing how we think, and fixing things that no one may ever know about. If all we hear from Jesus' message is that we must be "better" then we can become like the Pharisees, creating a list of rules that we (and others)

must follow to be holy. Think about some of the ways we do this. We may judge people based on:

- Their political affiliation
- How they dress for worship
- How much money they give to the church
- How they spend their time
- The music they listen to, books they read, or movies they watch
- Whether they serve visibly in the church (or in the way we think they should)
- How they spend their money

The list could go on, but the point is that we tend judge people based on some list we have created in our minds. Inevitably, the list of “sins” we curate consists primarily of things we don’t struggle with. We often have a convenient blind spot to our own vices.

Jesus wasn’t telling us to try harder to keep a bigger list of rules, but to strive for internal purity. If we only try to keep a list of rules, we may look good on the outside, but we can quickly become like the Pharisees. If we do not concern ourselves with internal purity we will find that we spend much of our time putting on a show, trying to hide our true selves from others. This is not the kind of life God desires. He desires us to be pure on the inside—then what comes out of us will be pure as well.

## Application

So the big question is how do we do that? First and foremost, we need to recognize that we can’t do it on our own. **We need Christ to change our hearts.** Apart from a relationship with Jesus, we will never be able to make progress in purifying our hearts. It is only through Christ that such change becomes possible. Listen to what one commentator said about this,

A radical change in the human heart is what is needed. Resetting the hands on the clock will not do it. Education and culture will not do it. Social reform (as needed as it may be!) will not do it. Even revolution and a new world order will not make it. *There is only one answer: regeneration.* There is no power in the world which can make a bad heart good. Only the gospel can do that. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).<sup>1</sup>

Everything starts with a relationship with Christ. If you are in Christ, He will help you do the work of heart-change. It is not an easy task. Much of the evil inside of us are things no one will ever know about unless we tell them. As such, it’s easy for us to pretend that these things don’t exist, or that they don’t matter. And after a person has trusted in Jesus, I think that’s the next step in the process.

**We need to recognize that our thoughts matter.** Jesus reminds us that every sin ultimately starts in our hearts and minds. So the question is, will we allow our minds to

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*. Vol. 1. Preaching the Word. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989.

dwell on sinful things, or will we do battle with sin at the source? We must turn our attention inward and examine what we think about, where we allow our minds to fixate, and start working to correct our thoughts.

The Bible speaks about how to do this in multiple places. In Romans 12, Paul says not to be conformed to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the *renewing of our minds*. We must choose to measure our thoughts and attitudes not by what is acceptable to our world and those around us, but by what God says. We must know His Word and align our attitudes with it, instead of going along with the attitudes of our world or even our friends and family.

**We must be as careful about what we feed our minds as we are about what we feed our bodies.** Most of us know that if we don't eat well, we won't feel well. The same is true with our minds. What we choose to feed our minds will have a profound effect on how healthy our thoughts are! If all you listen to is angry people, you will find yourself becoming angrier. If you watch shows that celebrate indulgence, you will begin to become more indulgent. We must carefully weigh what we allow to influence us. We can choose what we listen to and watch and read. We must decide to feed our minds only what we know will help us honor God. Take stock of the things you watch, read, and listen to, and if it doesn't promote a healthy heart, cut it out of your diet!

**We need to choose what we think about.** Not only do we choose what we feed our minds, we choose what we allow our minds to dwell on. I have often used the analogy (I don't know where I got it from originally) of a bird landing on your head when it comes to our thought life. You may not be able to stop a bird from landing on your head, but you can stop it from building a nest! Sinful thoughts are going to come through our minds, because we are sinful people living in a sinful world. But the question is will we choose to entertain those thoughts, to dwell on them, or will we shoo them away when they show up? Paul is helpful in this realm again,

<sup>8</sup> And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. (Philippians 4:8, NLT)

It's nearly impossible to just not think of something. For example, if I say don't think of pink elephants, it's really hard to do that...unless you choose to think of something else. This is what Paul says to do: rather than just trying to not think about bad things, we can do battle by fixing our minds on good things. When you feel tempted to dwell on evil thoughts (lust, anger, bitterness, deceit), choose instead to dwell on things that we know are God-honoring. Recite scripture rather than indulge sinful thoughts. Remind yourself of God's truths instead of allowing the lies of our world to build nests inside our minds.

Jesus reminds us that while the external stuff does matter, everything on the outside ultimately comes from what's inside. We should be people who have a filter all the time. But our filter shouldn't just sit between our brains and our mouths, we should have a filter over our hearts—one that ensures that all that gets in is what is good, and works to remove those things that aren't.

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