

CLEANSED HEARTS

MARK 7:1-23

According to Old Testament instructions, careful attention to details concerning cleanliness was required for someone to enter into the presence of God. One particular example is given in Leviticus 16 concerning the Day of Atonement. The high priest was to make three different sacrifices – one for himself, one for his tribe and one for the people collectively. But before each of these three sacrifices, the priest was required to take a bath and put on pure white linen robes that didn't have a spot on them. Also, anybody who helped him out in handling these sacrifices had to take a bath as well before returning to normal life within the community. All of this was a tremendous reminder of the holiness and purity of God, and our desperate need to be cleansed of our impurity before we come into his presence.

The ceremonial cleansing laws were beneficial in reminding God's people that we are unfit and unable to enter into God's presence without first being purified of our uncleanness. It is a similar concept to the way in which we prepare ourselves for a big date or business meeting. We shower, shave, brush our teeth, brush our hair, put on some deodorant and put on our cleanest clothes to make sure we look our best. There's just a certain standard of cleanliness that we are expected to uphold when we are meeting with someone important. And so there is also a righteous standard of cleanliness that we must experience in order to enter into the presence of God.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were right in their understanding of how man needed to be cleansed before he is fit to stand in the presence of God. But the problem was that they misunderstood what it is that makes man unclean in the first place. They adhered to many oral traditions which, at first, were "intended to express the intent of the law and extend it to matters of everyday life."¹ However, these oral traditions began to slowly evolve into being authoritative commands that had to be adhered to in addition to the written law. This was the accusation that Jesus brings against them in 7:8, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions."

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 208

Now, we often wrongly assume that Jesus labeled the religious leaders as hypocrites because they lacked any real devotion to the things of God. However, the problem was not their devotion, but rather what they were devoted to. This is what made their condition so serious and condemning. They were passionate about obtaining a right standing with God, but they were passionately pursuing this right standing through their own efforts and moral performance. And tragically, this shows us how good intentions can still lead us into idolatry.

One particular example of what had taken place under these additions to the written law was the issue of young adults declaring personal property as being 'devoted to God'. This act of declaring that your assets were devoted to God was sometimes manipulated and used as an escape from the responsibility of having to provide and take care of elderly parents. Essentially, it is like me telling my parents that I have dedicated what I would need to provide for them to the Lord instead. Therefore, I'm no longer under any obligation to support them and provide for them because my possessions are consecrated to God. This shows us how idolatry can make us subtle inventors of evil.²

This practice was an obvious twisting of God's law that tried to create loopholes in God's command to, "Honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12). And so Jesus accuses these religious leaders of letting man-made additions take precedent over the written law of God and leading people into perverting the instructions of God in the process.

So as he addresses the religious leaders on their traditions of cleanliness, Jesus calls everybody around him in close and orders that they listen and understand what he is about to tell them. Then he declares that, "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean'" (7:16).

So why is man unclean and in need of cleansing? Why is the world the way it is?

According to Jesus, it's not because the world's uncleanliness contaminates us, but rather because our inner uncleanliness contaminates the world. The sinfulness of man's heart is the problem that produces a world of uncleanliness. And therefore, just as outside objects and external things don't make us unclean, they also lack the power and ability to make us clean.

² see Romans 1:28-32

As the prophet Jeremiah once said:

“Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Lord God.” (Jeremiah 2:22)

After making this declarative statement in addressing the religious leaders, Jesus withdraws to the house to spend more time with his disciples and explains this teaching. The disciples aren't stupid, but they are still failing to understand the depth of what Jesus is implying.

James Edwards writes, “The disciples are like a dog looking at the pointed finger of its master rather than the object to which the finger points.”³ Jesus describes to them what he meant in his address to the religious leaders, and Mark notes this parenthetically by pointing out that, “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.” (7:19)

Given our current context and culture, we fail to grasp the weight of these words when Jesus declared that all foods are clean. This declaration from Jesus was now supposed to take precedence over all the ceremonial cleansing laws written in the Old Testament instruction. So this leads to an interesting question, Was Jesus altering God's Word or abolishing God's cleanliness commands that were given in the Old Testament?

And the short answer is, absolutely not. Jesus did not come to alter or abolish any of God's Word or commandments. Jesus came to uphold God's Word and commands. He even said this in his sermon on the mount when he said, “For truly, I say to you until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”⁴ So what's going on here in this passage is that Jesus was not declaring that the cleanliness laws were now to be abolished; he was declaring that the cleanliness laws have now been fulfilled!

And this shocking declaration made by Jesus is actually something that was foretold in the Old Testament itself through a vision described by the prophet Zechariah.⁵

³ Edwards, 212

⁴ see Matthew 5:17-20

⁵ see Zechariah 3:3-9

So why do we no longer need to observe the instructions of ceremonial cleanliness? How can we who are impure now stand in the presence of our holy and perfect God?

Well, as Timothy Keller puts it,

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). God clothed Jesus in our sin. He took our penalty, our punishment so that we, like Joshua, the high priest, can get what Revelation 19:7-8 pictures: ‘Let us rejoice and be glad... Fine linen, bright and clean, is given [to us] to wear.’ Pure linen – perfectly clean - without stain or blemish.”⁶

Man’s sinful heart is the source of man’s uncleanliness, but Jesus’ sacrifice is the soap that cleanses it. God has taken our garments stained with sin and replaced them with clean clothes purchased for us through what Jesus accomplished on our behalf. Man will never be made clean through adherence to commands or avoidance of contamination. Man is made clean through embracing the clothes of righteousness offered to us only through Jesus.

For nothing good have I
Whereby Thy grace to claim;
I’ll wash my garments white
In the blood of Calvary’s Lamb.

And now complete in Him,
My robe, His righteousness,
Close sheltered ‘neath His side,
I am divinely blest.

Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.⁷

⁶ Tim Keller, *King’s Cross*, (Redeemer CityNet, 2011), 84

⁷ Elvina M. Hall, *Jesus Paid It All*