

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

DEFILEMENT AND HOLINESS

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Mark 7:1 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6 He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." . . . 14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." . . . 21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and

they defile a person.”

DIAGNOSIS: Defilement

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Evil and the Defiling-Defiled Person

When the Pharisees accused Jesus’ disciples of ignoring the traditional Jewish habits of washing one’s hands before a meal or of eating unwashed foods (vv. 1-5), Jesus responded by calling them “hypocrites” (v. 6) for ignoring “the commandment of God” in favor of “human tradition” (v. 8). Wrong emphasis, Jesus says. Better to take stock of the more obvious problem of “fornication, theft, murder . . .” (v. 22, a summary of The Ten Commandments’ what not to do). If you want to pass judgment so badly, Jesus is saying, consider where all those “evil things” (v. 23) come from! Consider the commandments! [As vv. 9-13 point out, the Pharisees gutted the commandments by turning them into useless acts of worship (see v. 7); that is, they twisted the commandments in order to glorify themselves.] By focusing on the external “traditions” of the elders, the Pharisees avoided the critical point altogether. Our failure to obey the commandments, Jesus points out, reveals their point of origin along with the real problem for which the commandments were given. [Jesus’ going-inside coming-outside metaphor in v. 15 targeted the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who were so keen on cleanliness laws. The necessary bodily functions of eating (relatively clean) and eliminating (relatively unclean) was used to illustrate how the Pharisees misapplied the traditional laws, and in so doing neglected the commandments. More importantly, the metaphor served to reinterpret “the things that come out” as all the “evil things” targeted by the commandments.] The real defilement and point of interest for us, Jesus says, is in the “person” (v. 23) who not only does evil but more basically “intends” (v. 22)

evil. In Jesus' analysis, there is no neat and clear distinction between evil intentions, evil acts, and evil deeds. Jesus never says that "fornication, theft, murder . . ." are evils all by themselves; rather that *the person* intending evil is defiled already. The defiling-defiled person, then, not the evil deeds in and of themselves, is Jesus' concern. Focusing either on religious traditions or on evil deeds misses what really defiles us. But focusing on our evil intentions *prior* to the acts themselves puts us all in a bind from which we cannot escape.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Heart Attack!

A too narrow view of Law, that is, a too-narrow purposing of the commandments' demands, attacks only evil deeds while leaving unanswered not only the question of good deeds but the question of the person doing the deeds. But the problem of evil, Jesus says, springs from deep within a person, from the undivided "human heart" where evil "intentions" originate (vv. 21-23). In pursuing ever deeper the purpose for which the commandments were given, Jesus attacks the innermost "heart" of a person, so that there is nothing whatsoever that can escape the critique of the Law. [Other words for "heart" that are commonly used are: spirit, will, soul, mind, and faith. They represent the whole person and cannot be further subdivided.] With his attack on the human heart, Jesus allows no separation at all between the person and the deed; if one is evil then so is the other. In Semitic thought, the "heart" and its "intentions" represent the *totality* of a person. So Jesus' heart-attack is an attack on the entire evil person. [Note: When the heart or totality of a person is summed up using the notion of *faith*, the evil that Jesus speaks of here is nothing other than faith in oneself, that is, idolatry. And idolatry of course already breaks the first commandment.] This widens the scope of the Law and makes it impossible to rightly obey any of the commandments. For Jesus, then, the problem of evil is ultimately a problem of the

whole undivided person who is inescapably evil.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Defiled Unto Death*

Yet it is not merely against ourselves and others that evil is a problem. Because the commandments issue from God, evil is essentially “unclean,” contrary to the will of God, and an affront to God’s holiness, that is, against God himself. Jesus’ suffering and death demonstrates the scope of our defiling defilement. Jesus, representing Israel (15:12-14) and thus all humanity and thus all creation, is defiled by blasphemy, blood, nakedness, God-forsakenness, death, and sin itself (14:64; 15:24, 34, 37-38). And if Jesus also represents God (1:1; 15:39), then by defiling Jesus we ourselves are shown to be defiling God himself. Defilement then is not just a ritual word for uncleanness, whether inner or outer, but a word for God’s comprehensive judgment against us and against humanity and against the totality of creation. Jesus’ crucifixion exposes Sin and Death as God’s judgment against us. The purpose for which the commandments were given, then, is to show us through our sinful defilements our utter dependence on God. Our immediate problem is that sin’s defilement is its own consequence: death is final. Worse yet is the implication that Jesus’ defiling crucifixion is the failure of God’s promise to Israel, indeed to creation itself. The Law, though it is from God, has no answer to these problems; it can only accuse.

PROGNOSIS: Holiness

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God’s Purpose Fulfilled*

As Mark reports at the end of his Gospel, Jesus’ resurrection from the dead was undoubtedly an astonishing and fearful event which left everyone speechless (16:8). But not for long! What was impossible through the Law had happened. Sin and Death were overcome. God had created anew, out of nothing, out of his own

holiness and unbounded mercy. As Paul and the other Gospels tell us, and as Mark presupposes from the outset (1:1, 9-11, 14), Jesus' resurrection appearances and the sending and receiving of the Holy Spirit could only mean that God was bringing his promises to fulfillment. The Good News is this: Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection ended the Law's accusations and freed us for life in God; and its effect for us is the proclamation: "Your sins are forgiven in Jesus." Yet what a strange fulfillment! The world itself does not seem to have changed at all (2 Pet. 3:4). Everything still looks defiled, unclean, unholy, and subject to death; and religion everywhere (witness the Jews) continues on as if God had not already conquered Sin and Death.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Hearting (or Trusting) in God Alone*

God's purpose for creation is being fulfilled by creating in us a new "heart," a heart that trusts in God alone despite outward appearances to the contrary. In one of Mark's earliest healings (2:5-12), we see that it is not the healing itself, nor by extension the resurrection of Jesus, that is for us the chief mark of the new creation, but rather "faith" in Jesus—which is nothing other than trust in God. The "heart" or faith that trusts in God is a new totality that covers the whole person. Against such a heart, such faith, such work-of-God, the Law has nothing to say and is silent, ended, fulfilled. As a creation of the Holy Spirit, the heart and therefore the whole person that trusts in God alone is not subject to any defilement but is wholly and completely clean. As strange and impossible as it seems by outward appearances, such persons are holy as God is holy. Therefore the Church rightly calls all those who trust in Christ "holy ones," saints (compare Mk 1:8, 24 with Rom. 1:4, 7). Nonetheless, as everyday experience teaches us, our faith-that-makes-us-holy, while "in" the world, is not "of" the world.

Our old-creation faith still defiles the totality of our flesh and our world with its idolatries. Even so, and against every measurement we can conceive, our faith in Christ (or heart-in-Christ) sanctifies us wholly as well.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Following the Heart*

Christ-trusters are in a Catch-22, an impossible dilemma. We follow two hearts (Step 5). We know that our traditions (liturgy, holy-days, ethical norms, etc.) are good for us because they remind us of the necessity for Christ, so we follow them as best we can, but we know even more certainly that our traditions and ethics do not *make* us “good” or well pleasing to God. We must live (under the Law) and we are freed to live (in forgiveness), but we live only as sinners and as saints at the same time, wholly both in their unyielding totalities. As sinners we are under the judgment of Sin and subject to the powers of Death in everything we do—thus defiling and defiled; yet as saints we are under grace and the promise of eternal life in everything that Christ has done and does through us—thus clean and holy. Though our eyes cannot see holiness or measure it, God sees that everything we do by faith in Christ is a “good work” well pleasing to God. Nor do we judge ourselves or what we do, to determine whether we are good or evil, as if that were a possibility for us. For to judge the left hand from the right hand (Matt. 6:3-4) is immediately to judge according to the Law. And though others, even our fellow sinner-saints, will certainly judge us according to the Law (even when we intend only good), God’s word of forgiveness will be the only final word which, in its totality, will complete our resurrection in Jesus Christ.