

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

CURB YOUR LEGALISM

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

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Analysis by Paige G. Evers

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 tradition 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 the 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: Dirty on the Inside

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Hygiene*

The Pharisees and scribes come from Jerusalem to investigate the Jesus phenomenon. Their mental ticket books at the ready, the keepers of religious tradition cite Jesus for running a lax operation. Some of his disciples were eating with-gasp-unwashed hands (v. 2). The Pharisees and scribes lunge on this infraction of the law and challenge Jesus, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (v. 5).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hypocrites*

Jesus doesn’t respond with an etiquette lesson or an explanation of human hygiene. Instead, he calls the Pharisees and scribes what they are: “you hypocrites” (v. 6). Quoting Isaiah, Jesus exposes the condition of the legalists’ hearts. They cling to human precepts and put their trust in the traditions of their elders over the commandment of God (v. 8). Their hearts are far from the very God who their traditions are supposed to honor.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Hopeless*

When the heart forsakes God, the evil intentions of the heart are given free reign. Human traditions are no match for fornication, theft, murder, and all the other forms of evil that Jesus lists (vv. 21-22). No amount of hand-washing can make one clean. The ultimate outcome of the legalists abandoning the commandment of God and holding to human tradition (v. 8) is that God abandons them. He leaves them to wallow alone in their eternal uncleanness.

PROGNOSIS: Being Made Clean

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *New Hope*

In the cross of Jesus Christ, God intervenes. He does something new in the death and resurrection of his Son, a new thing that human tradition and the law of the Pharisees can never do. God triumphs over the evil intentions of the heart. By taking on avarice, wickedness, deceit, and the whole list of evils that come from within, God gives sinners a heart transplant. He replaces their defiled hearts with the pure and righteous heart of Jesus Christ.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *New Holding*

Now the hearts of those who gather around Jesus (as the Pharisees, scribes, and crowds do in this lesson) can hold onto Christ, not onto human tradition. Cleansed of their sin, they can honor and worship God rightly because they trust in him instead of in their own keeping of the law.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *New Hands*

Even with the lectionary's piecing together this pericope from different sections of Mark 7, we can see how Jesus wants his message to be made known to the Pharisees and scribes (vv. 1-8), the crowd ("Listen to me, all of you, and understand" vv. 14-15) and his disciples (vv. 21-23). It is good news to all that God doesn't desire legalism. Instead, because of what he has done in Jesus Christ, God offers a new kind of life. One doesn't have to worry about how well one is obeying the rules and keeping oneself clean. Having been made clean, we are now free to use our hands to serve others. We might even get them dirty in the process. God gives freedom from the law. God offers his grace. That is the same good news we get to share as we serve the legal-minded, the crowds, and even the disciples of Jesus who are around us.