

NCBC Youth Group
December 8, 2019

SPIRITUAL DEFILEMENT
MARK 7:14-23

Introduction

In our study last week, we saw a group of prominent Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, and they asked Him a question: “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?” (7:5). This is not a sanitary issue they are concerned about. It is not about the disciples eating with physically dirty hands. This is a spiritual issue.

The Pharisees believed that doing outward acts helped them achieve righteousness. They did many outward acts such as washing hands, cleansing themselves, and washing cups, pitchers, and copper pots (7:3-4). These were all part of their man-made tradition, or the “tradition of the elders” (7:5). Failing to perform these ceremonial washings would make someone spiritually unclean, or spiritually defiled. This is obviously not true, because it is man-made traditions, not commanded by God.

After seeing Jesus’ disciples eating with “impure hands,” they asked Jesus why His disciples broke the tradition of the elders. Jesus didn’t answer them immediately. Instead, He indicts them for their hypocrisy. Last week, we discussed how these Pharisees observed their man-made traditions over the God’s word (7:9, 13), and Jesus cited an example of how they violated the God-given Fifth Commandment in order to observe their man-made traditions (7:9-13).

Our passage today is a continuation of the text from last week. In our text, we will see Jesus answer their question. He will do so by stating the truth in a parable and then explaining the parable.

Verse 14, the opening verse in our text, toward the end, says, “Listen to Me, all of you, and understand.” For far too long, the people have been listening to the Pharisees, who were the religious leaders. They were supposed to be the people who provided spiritual guidance, but instead of providing any kind of positive guidance, Jesus called them “blind guides of the blind” (Matt. 15:14). Instead of leading people to God, they led people far away from God with their endless man-made regulations and traditions.

As we begin our study, let us also listen to Jesus and understand the truth He is about to teach.

The Parable

The truth is stated in verse 15: “There is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.” Here is the issue: What is the source of spiritual defilement? Is it external or internal?

The Pharisees taught that it is external. For example, if you ate with impure hands, the food you touched would be spiritually unclean, and once that food goes into you, you are defiled and spiritually unclean. But, Jesus destroys that kind of thinking because the Bible nowhere teaches that. Jesus said in verse 15, “There is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him.” That’s why His disciples did not perform ceremonial and ritual hand washing, because it has absolutely no impact on their spiritual cleanliness.

Instead, Jesus teaches that the “things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.” The source of spiritual defilement is internal. It’s what comes out, not what goes in that defiles us. Jesus will explain what that means momentarily, but it is important to note that at this point, Matthew’s account adds: “Then the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?’” (Matt. 15:12).

They were probably offended for many reasons. After all, Jesus exposed their hypocrisy, destroyed their man-made religious system, and did not submit to the tradition of the elders. Jesus never sought to compromise with them by trying to fit the gospel into their legalistic system.¹ They were supposed to be the religious leaders, but Jesus does not recognize them as such. He exposes their hypocrisy and calls them blind guides. It doesn’t surprise us that they were offended by this.

The Explanation

Jesus’ disciples asked Him about the parable, and Jesus gives them the explanation in verse 18. However, before Jesus explains the teaching, He gives them a mild rebuke. Verse 18, “Are you so lacking in understanding also?” They had been with Jesus for some time, and they still failed to fully grasp the truth that it is the inner righteousness that matters. But we should also remember that it wasn’t just the Pharisees and scribes that practiced legalistic man-made rituals. The people also practiced them. Imagine following some religious tradition for your entire life. It would be very hard to separate from that and break away from it, so in part, we can understand the disciples’ struggles.

¹ See Mark 2:21-22. The gospel and their religious system are incompatible. One cannot be sewn into the other.

But our compassionate and merciful Lord did not just leave His disciples without explanation. He explains the truth in the second part of verse 18 to verse 19: “Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, [19] because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? (Thus He declared all foods clean.)”

From the explanation, we see very clearly that it is an issue of the heart. It is an internal issue, not an external issue. Both clean and unclean food that you eat goes to your stomach. Our bodies digest that food and is eliminated. Eating with ceremonially unwashed hands will not make us spiritually unclean, because the food that you touched with your impure hands still goes to your stomach, and it is digested and eliminated just the same as if you ate with clean hands.

Listen carefully, because we are not talking about sanitary issues here. Is it wise to wash your hands if they are dirty before picking up food to eat? Of course, it’s a good idea to do that. But, is it necessary to wash your hands again ceremonially to make it “ritually clean”? That is absolutely unnecessary.

Verse 19 says that the food does not go into your heart, but into your stomach. Again, this is an issue of the heart. No matter what we do on the outside—washing, cleaning, etc.—we cannot purify our heart with external actions and legalism. We cannot work to attain salvation; we cannot work to earn righteousness. Likewise, if we are saved, no unclean food can defile us. We cannot be made spiritually unclean just by eating certain foods or not performing certain ceremonial washings.

Old Testament Dietary Laws

If you look at the end of verse 19, you will find this: “Thus He declared all foods clean.”² This is a reference to Old Testament dietary laws. We have heard of kosher foods, so we have some understanding that there are certain dietary laws and restrictions in the Old Testament. We find a list of forbidden foods in Leviticus 11. Why is that? Why did God give them those restrictions and then in the New Testament, Jesus declares all foods clean and removes the restrictions?

The answer is because God wanted to separate His people from the surrounding nations. Israel was to be the light to the world, and these restrictions made it very difficult

² Interestingly, many believe that Peter is the source for Mark’s account. In Acts 10, God used a vision to show Peter that all foods are clean, preparing Him to witness to Cornelius, a Gentile.

for them to mingle with other nations. Not eating the same things or preparing food the same way would make it very difficult to mingle with other nations; thus, keeping them distinct and separate. However, these no longer apply in the New Testament because the Jew and the Gentile are one in the church.

An Issue of the Heart

Verse 20 continues, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man.” We already saw that it is an issue of the heart in verse 19, but what does the heart have anything to do with defilement? Well, we are not talking about the heart as an organ of the body. We are talking about the heart as the inner person. It describes our emotional and spiritual being. When you talk about someone that has a big heart or a good heart, are you talking about them physically having an enlarged heart, which is a medical issue? No, you are talking about their attitudes and affections.

In verse 21 He tells us what proceeds out of the heart. Listen carefully: “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, [22] deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. [23] All these things proceed from within and defile the man.”

Many people believe that man is basically good, but we do bad things here and there. The Bible tells us the exact opposite. Man is corrupt, and what flows from corrupt hearts are corrupt deeds and actions. If you look at the list in verse 21, you find that it is very similar to the second half of the Ten Commandments.³

How does what comes out of a person defile that person? Jesus said in Matthew 7, “[17] So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit... [20] So then, you will know them by their fruits.” If you are corrupt inside, you will bear bad fruit. So, all these evil things that come out of you is proof that your heart is polluted.

Matthew 12:34 says, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (ESV). What we say, what comes out of our mouths, shows us what kind of heart we have. Is this anything new? Is this solely a New Testament teaching? No, the Old Testament also speaks on this issue. Proverbs 4:23, “Watch your heart with all diligence, for from it flow

³ “False witness” is included in Matthew 15:19, and honoring father and mother is recorded in the previous text (Mk. 7:9-13).

the springs of life.” Job 14:4, “Who can make the clean out of the unclean?” Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?”

Conclusion

Since the heart is the issue, how do we change our hearts? Well, we can’t change our hearts by doing good deeds. We watched Home Alone 2 earlier this week, and a character in the movie said that a good deed erases a bad deed. That is totally false. We can’t go around doing good deeds to erase all the corruption in our hearts. Ceremonial cleansing and rituals will not make our hearts clean either.

So, where do we turn? We must turn to Christ. Romans 3:10 tells us “There is none righteous, not even one; ... [12] There is none who does good, there is not even one.” In God’s eyes, even our good deeds are filthy rags (Is. 64:6). We cannot work to gain righteousness and we cannot work to earn salvation. That’s why Ezekiel 36:25-27 tells us that God will give us a new heart. Only God can give us a new nature and a new heart. We are hopeless without it.

Second Corinthians 5:21 says, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Through faith in Jesus, His righteousness is imputed unto us. In other words, His righteousness is ascribed or attributed to us. It is given to us.

If you believe that you are basically a good person, and you occasionally do bad things, you are living in grave error. If you think that you are not that bad, and you don’t need Christ, you are also believing a lie. Jesus said in Mark 7:23, “All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.” We must repent and turn to Christ. We must be given a new nature and a new heart.