

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

1 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus 2 and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

3 (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

5 So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

6 He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’ 8 **You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.**”

14 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 15 Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

21 For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

## God’s law and human tradition

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

This passage in Mark is a bit of a change from the early chapters because up to now Mark has been concentrating on the coming of the Kingdom. Jesus healing, doing miracles, and starting to draw attention to himself. Although he had previously had a bit of a run in with the Pharisees, when he allowed the disciples to eat some ears of corn on the sabbath, which in the law was classed as harvesting. Therefore work. Therefore forbidden. Here there’s a serious clash, again with the Pharisees, and the start of the process which ended with his death sentence.

So we need to look at the crucial difference between human tradition and God’s laws, because in church hierarchies, just because of human failings, there’s misunderstanding as to what is God’s perfect law, and what is human misjudgement. At the point when Jesus came along there was already debate among the Jews themselves about Old Testament law; much of the Old Testament books like Leviticus is ceremonial law which related to worship practices at the time, and also civil laws which again were only relevant to Jewish society hundreds of years before Christ. Some of these were still being followed because of tradition and not because they helped anyone’s faith. Of course, moral laws like the 10 commandments are clearly still relevant to us now. Jesus used his discernment as to what was human tradition and what was the true Spirit and intention of the Law according to God.

Christians who insist that the entire bible is perfect and literally true have not really thought this through.

We're told by Mark, addressing his non Jewish readers (like us), that *the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.*

Now we're all experts on handwashing thanks to covid we can look at this with some authority! But ours is about hygiene and not ceremonial. Jesus wasn't bothered about it at all, in fact he exclusively reserves his strongest criticism for these 'hypocrites' and quotes the prophet Isaiah to back him up: *'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules' (Is 29:13).*

Then Jesus says **"You've let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions"**.

So what he is saying is that they have added a layer of nonsense on top of God's completely righteous commandments which does nothing but enslave everyone to pointless observance rather than enabling them to really worship Him from their hearts. In 2021 we have a very different cultural situation but I don't need to tell you that we still have people today who do the very same thing, in the sense that they try and make people do things because they have always done them, whether or not they help us to serve God's purposes. There are traditions of course which help us, such as the sharing of communion, although I think Jesus would be startled by how excessively ritualised it's become in some churches.

Considering it started with a simple shared meal, just dipping bread and drinking wine.

We worship God and not the ceremony. The well known worship leader Matt Redman completely stopped having sung worship in his church at one time because it had become all about the music, and not about God. *When the music fades* is the song that was written in response to this.

*I'll bring You more than a song, For a song in itself*

*Is not what You have required. You search much deeper within*

*Through the way things appear; You're looking into my heart.*

Jesus makes the distinction here: empty tradition passed off as God's rules is simply not acceptable in God's kingdom.

He challenges the very nature of how the Pharisees operate and challenges their *certainty* about how people should be seen to behave. Living by faith as Jesus calls us to do will always involve a level of *uncertainty*. This is a good thing, I've discovered!

We all like a routine. We cling on to what makes us feel safe.

Fear drives us to seek security. But God calls us to step out of our routines, and we don't like it. And actually when we do, we realise how we've become imprisoned in our comfort zones.

Archdeacon Edward was speaking this week about how during the pandemic we have been controlled by fear and how we *need*, for our own sanity and actually for our own *health*, to begin to break free from it. The Kingdom of God announced by Jesus renews us and revitalises us and brings healing, and release.

Jesus said *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.* He broke all the man made rules. He upset everyone who was certain they knew what God's law said. If we're controlled by our own rules then they're not of God, because God's rules are there to set us free, not to imprison us.

The second part of this passage is about how God wants our hearts even more than he wants our obedience to his laws, partly because he knows we can never be fully obedient. Initially Jesus speaks about food – *Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them.* Mark adds a note here to say Jesus declared all foods clean, which was probably a relief to some Jews! But the main point was about what comes out of a person, in other words, that we see what is in someone's heart by how they speak and how they act. And this is crucial because God is more interested in our hearts than anything else, in what we really think and what we really want from life. Because if we want to be complete and integrated and at peace with ourselves and others, then God needs to be at the centre of everything we are. Of course we're all naturally resistant to this, but it remains true. Material things are ultimately of no consequence if we are not at peace with our creator. Matthew 6:33 *...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [essentials of life] will be given to you as well.* To seek to know God, that's the primary aim of who we are as human beings. The good news of the gospel is that if we follow Jesus, God's gift to us is that we will know Him.