

“Inside Out”

Mark 7:1-23 ¹

I’ve told you before that one of the saddest moments in my pastoral ministry occurred in a *Burger King* in another city. I’ve long been a fan of the *Whopper* sandwich, and as I was ordering one I noticed a couple of fellows wearing the uniform of a company where one of our members worked. I went over and asked them if they knew our member, which they did. I commented that I was his pastor, and one of them responded, “*I’m surprised that he has one.*”

I still think about that a lot. It reminds me that, while it is relationships with Christians that bring most people to Jesus, it’s also relationships with Christians that keep most people away. As Gandhi famously said, “**I like your Christ; I don’t like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.**” Hold that thought while we look at our text.

As Mark 7 begins, a group of Pharisees and scribes has come from Jerusalem to Galilee to bring back a report on this Jesus of Nazareth who has stirred things up so. As they hang around through the day, they notice that some of the persons following Jesus—it’s not clear whether or not these are the Twelve—are not following proper Jewish procedures for hand washing before they eat, and they complain to Jesus about it.

This was not a matter of hygiene, such as washing one’s hands after visiting the bathroom. It wasn’t even a matter of washing one’s hands for hygienic purposes prior to eating. The complaint was that these followers of Jesus weren’t following “the traditions of the elders,” which had to do with a particular ritual before eating. A similar complaint today might be something like, “When your disciples offered thanks before their meal, they didn’t bow their heads and close their eyes, as our custom requires.”

As we begin, there is a danger in texts like this that we will caricature and malign the Scribes and Pharisees without really understanding their concern. The Pharisees as a religious and political party traced their lineage to the Maccabean Revolt against the Romans in the second century, B.C.—a time span rather like the year 1800 might be to us today. The Maccabees were rebels and martyrs for the cause of faithful Judaism, and the Pharisees were rightly proud of that heritage.

The Scribes went back even farther. The Scribes originated in the fourth and fifth centuries, B.C., during the period after Israel returned from the Babylonian Captivity. Because the returning exiles rightly understood their captivity as judgment for failure to keep God’s Law as found in the Five Books of Moses, they resolved to become faultlessly-faithful law-keepers so as to protect their nation from future destruction.

This was, in itself, a worthy goal, but its implementation became a problem. Originally, the goal had been to teach Israel how to live holy lives before the Lord, and to make such teaching practical and such guidelines achievable.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 24, 2017. Parallel passage is Matthew 15:1-20.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

Over the centuries, the Scribes had created quite a “hedge” about the Law, circumscribing God’s central commands about righteousness and justice with literally hundreds of made-up procedures; and their intent had not been evil, though it had been misguided. The idea was that if they created a bunch of rituals and procedures outside and beyond the Law, and if people worked hard to live according to those extra guidelines, then they wouldn’t ever get close to breaking “The Big Ten,” and the nation would be saved.

This body of “extra laws, rituals, and procedures” was still in oral form in Jesus’ day, and it was known as “the traditions of the elders.”² This whole project may have begun well, but by Jesus’ time, “the tail was wagging the dog.”

Many illustrations could be given in our own time, but as just one example, I remember the tale of a young priest who, after only a few months in his first parish, was confronted by the elders of the congregation about his leadership of Communion. “Father George was our pastor for thirty years,” they said, “and he always touched the radiator before serving communion. You aren’t doing this, and we believe you are in serious error.”

Befuddled, the young pastor called the older priest to ask about this. Was there some unusual part of the ritual he had missed in seminary? “Oh, yes,” Father George replied, “I always touched the radiator after moving forward to serve the people so I would discharge the static electricity from the carpet. I didn’t want to shock them.”

I expect that you can see “the tail wagging the dog” in that story, and the whole idea is more true of us as we sit here this morning than we probably want to admit. The order in which we do things in our worship service, for example, has reasons behind it, some of them theological, but the form of our worship has very little to do with Scripture or with the teaching of Jesus. Nearly everything we do, and the ways in which we do it, is culturally-conditioned, not Gospel. What we do is “twentieth-century mid-Atlantic Baptist,” not authentic first-century practice.

To continue the example, if I were to move the offering or the announcements to the end of the service, inconsequential as that would be, it would throw you off balance, and some would loudly object that “We’ve never done it that way before.” The examples of such things are nearly endless.

So now, perhaps, we can come closer to experiencing this scene in Mark 7 the way the Scribes and Pharisees did long ago. Jesus’ reply to their complaint was to tell them that, far from keeping the commands of God, they were holding on to merely human traditions. They were, in fact, invalidating and ignoring God’s commands in favor of their human traditions. “*You nullify the word of God by your tradition,*” Jesus told them, “*and you do many other similar things*” (Mark 7:13).

Then Jesus went on to drop a bombshell that reverberates to this very moment: “*Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that goes into a person from outside can defile him but the things that come out of a person are what defile him*” (Mark 7:14).

In that one statement, Jesus nullified not only the handwashing procedure the Scribes and Pharisees had complained about, but the entirety of their oral tradition, and perhaps even the Law of Moses. It’s as though Jesus had said, “Kosher is no more.” And Mark added a

² Several centuries later, all that got written down, and those documents are now known as the *Mishnah*.

parenthetical note, “*thus he declared all foods clean,*” just so we wouldn’t miss the point (Mark 7:19).

It would be hard to overstate the shock that passed through the crowd as Jesus made this pronouncement, and later, inside the house, Jesus’ disciples asked Him about it. They couldn’t believe it, either.

¹⁸ *He said to them, “Are you also as lacking in understanding? Don’t you realize that nothing going into a person from the outside can defile him?”* ¹⁹ *For it doesn’t go into his heart but into the stomach and is eliminated” (thus he declared all foods clean).*

²⁰ *And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of people’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, ²² adulteries, greed, evil actions, deceit, self-indulgence, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within and defile a person” (Mark 7:18-23).*

There are several other interesting things to see here, but I need to move on a bit just now. I’ll put them in the online version of this message this afternoon.³ Jesus made another huge point in our text, and that’s where I want us to end up this morning.

Because Jesus knows what’s in our hearts, seeing our motivations as well as our actions,⁴ He challenged the Scribes and Pharisees at a level deeper than their external rituals: “*Isaiah prophesied correctly about you hypocrites, as it is written ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’*” (Mark 7:6; Isaiah 29:13).

Jesus accused the Jewish leaders of no longer really caring about the Law of God. He accused them of not caring as much about holiness and God’s Law as they did about their own influence and position, which they maintained through all the legalistic requirements they imposed on their people. And this brings me back to that encounter in *Burger King*.

One of my favorite courses to teach at Southern Seminary in Louisville was “The Psychology of Religious Experience,” and one of the very first books I ever read about the psychology of religion—nearly fifty years ago—was Gordon Allport’s *The Individual and His Religion*.⁵ Gordon Allport was a psychologist who studied how people go about their “faithing,” and he was the first to notice that there are two very different ways in which humans relate to their religious faith—whether they’re Christians or not.

Allport noticed that some people wear their religion and their “faith” rather like a coat that they put on and take off as the occasion warrants, while other people’s religious life is more like a persistent inner *fire*. Allport called the faith of the “Coat Folks” *extrinsic faith*, while he called the

³ First of all, neither friends nor foes ever seemed to regard Jesus as cancelling the ritual laws of Moses. There is no evidence that He taught His followers to eat pork, to work on the Sabbath, or to stop circumcising their sons. On the other hand, Jesus did clarify what God had meant by these things, and He fulfilled many of them, so that they became unnecessary going forward—Temple sacrifices, for example.

This matter of food laws remained an issue in the early church for decades, and it was not easily resolved. It’s interesting that none of the first-century leaders of the church referred to this teaching in Mark 7 to resolve those later disputes—and there were plenty of opportunities to do so—so whatever Jesus originally said must have been understood differently than what it appears to be here. Rather than citing this teaching from Jesus, those first-century food discussions centered on Peter’s vision in Acts 10. See Acts 10:9-16, 11:2-18, 15:7-29; Romans 14:2-20; Galatians 2:11-17; Colossians 2:20-22.

One hypothesis is that in referring to the digestive process in v. 19, Jesus wasn’t actually saying that all foods are ritually clean, but that somehow all foods “come out clean” (feces, though distasteful, were not considered ritually unclean). It’s hard to know what He meant.

⁴ John 2:25; Hebrews 4:12-13

⁵ Gordon Allport, *The Individual and His Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

faith of the “Fire Folks” *intrinsic faith*. Whole books have been written on the differences between these two approaches, and you have a chart in your order of worship that compares them, but let me try to summarize the differences in a couple of sentences.

According to Allport, Extrinsic Faith is committed to “the letter of the law,” as the Scribes and Pharisees were. Persons who take this approach tend to experience life mostly as “black or white,” and they tend to be selfish, defensive, and judgmental. Folks who wear their religion like a coat wear it only when they think that doing so will help them accomplish other, non-religious goals, which are much more important to them. “**Coat Folks**” tend to think in terms of “us” and “them,” are suspicious of passionate religious expression, and tend to be secretly afraid of God.

“**Fire Folks**,” on the other hand, are committed to “the spirit and the intent of the law” much more than to “the letter of the law.” Fire Folks view most situations as complex and nuanced rather than “black or white.” They tend to be flexible, creative, and thoughtful. Folks whose religion resembles an inner fire find that this fire becomes the organizing principle of their lives, rather than something peripheral or “tacked on.” These persons follow the precepts of their faith whether or not it’s convenient to do so. “Fire Folks” tend to view God as loving and forgiving, and they are passionate about their intense and personal relationship with God.

So what those fellows in *Burger King* were telling me about my friend was that he was a “Coat Christian.” My friend—I’ll call him Bill—talked a good game on Sunday, at church, but when he was on the job, his conversation, attitudes, and conduct were anything but Christlike. That’s what kept Gandhi from following Jesus, and that’s really the main point Jesus was making with the Scribes and Pharisees.

On another occasion, Jesus said, “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?’ Then I will announce to them, ‘I NEVER KNEW YOU. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!’*” (Matthew 7:21-23). Jesus was talking about “Coat Folks” and “Fire Folks,” there, too. The hard news from Jesus is that only “Fire Folk” will enter God’s Kingdom.

Now the truth of the matter is that it is just as easy—and probably just as common—for us as it was for the ancients to believe all the “correct” doctrines and carry out our prescribed rituals in a perfunctory way while our hearts and wills are not engaged with God at all. We put it on; we take it off. We bracket our lives into “secular” and “sacred” silos and prefer to keep them as separate as possible.

One diagnostic tool for discovering whether we’re really “Coat” or “Fire” comes when we experience what I call “The Spirituality Test.” These are moments when we stick ourselves with a pin or close the door on our finger, and the uncensored exclamation that erupts is a pretty good barometer of our inner spiritual life.

On one occasion, in this service, I slung a glass of water around up here (I’m still sorry for baptizing Robin and Megan in that moment) and asked you why water came out of that glass. The obvious answer is that I slung the water out of it. But the more important answer is that water came out of the glass—and not orange juice—because the glass was *filled* with water. *What comes out is what’s inside* (Luke 6:45).⁶

⁶ My mother taught three-year-olds in Sunday School for decades, and she noted that when three-year-olds swear, they use the words in the expected way. They had heard them at home from their “Coat” parents. And, though I left the Navy more than twenty-five years ago, I am not without sin, myself.

We've spent more than two months considering *the Fruit of the Spirit*,⁷ which exemplify the character of Jesus. This morning, Jesus gave us another list.⁸ If the Truth were known—and it is known to God—which list describes your life, your mind, your heart? And what do you need to do about that?

⁷ Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control (Galatians 5:22-23).

⁸ Evil thoughts; sexual immoralities; thefts; murders; adulteries; greed; evil actions; deceit; self-indulgence; envy; slander; pride; foolishness (Mark 7:21-22).