

Heart Religion

Mark 6:53 - 7:23 ⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to the land of Gennesaret and anchored there. ⁵⁴ And when they came out of the boat, immediately the people recognized Him, ⁵⁵ ran through that whole surrounding region, and began to carry about on beds those who were sick to wherever they heard He was. ⁵⁶ Wherever He entered into villages, cities, or in the country, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged Him that they might just touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched Him were made well.

Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. ² Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. ³ For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. ⁴ When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches. ⁵ Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

⁶ He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. ⁷ And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' ⁸ "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men -- the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do." ⁹ He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. ¹⁰ "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' ¹¹ "But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban" -- ' (that is, a gift to God), ¹² "then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, ¹³ "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."

¹⁴ When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand: ¹⁵ "There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. ¹⁶ "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!"

¹⁷ When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. ¹⁸ So He said to them, "Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ "because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" ²⁰ And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. ²¹ "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, ²² "thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. ²³ "All these evil things come from within and defile a man."

Perhaps you have had someone say to you, "All religions are basically the same." When someone says that, I always want to ask if he or she has studied all the religions of the world so as to make the judgement. And then, as a follow-up question, I want to ask, how do you know that the differences between religions are not greater than the similarities? It is really a very ignorant statement to suppose that all religions are just different versions of one another. The people who say that, want to preach tolerance and a big group hug by all the world's religions, but they don't seem to realise that one very important person would not be part of that group-hug: Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus was no ecumenicist. Jesus made it very clear that there was a true religion and a false religion, a true faith and a false faith. This was one of those times.

The Jesus we see here is not what 21st-century people think of as 'nice'. He is not very 'tolerant' of the Pharisees, and does not seem to be open-minded as far as their religion goes. We'll see why.

Mark tells us in verses 53 to 56 that Christ's ministry was still overwhelmingly popular. When people recognised Him, they quickly spread the word, and people came running, carrying their sick. Verse 56 is rather like a summary statement of His power and of people's trust in Him. They just wanted to touch Him to be healed. They just wanted Him to walk past their sick and have His clothes brush theirs. His power was unlimited and spilling over on the whole population. This is

God walking among men, and men just want to be near Him and have part of the curse of sin removed.

But that's not the whole story. Yes, people are glad for the mercy and grace of God over their physical condition; they are not always as enthusiastic over God's plan to deal with their inner condition. Heal me on the outside, yes; tell me that my inner man is sick, no, not so fast. That's exactly the clash that happens here in chapter 7. Problems between Christ and the Pharisees have been building and brewing, but here the dam wall bursts. Jesus draws a clear line in the sand, and when He is finished, it is very clear: the Pharisees' religion is not Jesus' religion. The Pharisees' doctrine is not Christ's doctrine. Indeed, the Pharisees' God, is not Christ's Father, as He Himself says in John 8. Jesus is publicly drawing the line in the sand to everyone listening, and saying: you know I am Messiah. But I do not stand with those who operate your synagogues. Their religion is false. You will either take up a cross and follow me, or you will keep things comfortable and follow them.

And as this debate unfolds, we see something more than a minor disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees. We see the difference between the true faith, and the false. We see the difference between man-made external religion, and God's revealed religion. In other words, this passage teaches us the difference between hypocritical religion and heart religion. We can follow the account through three stages. First, the example of false religion. Second, we have the authority of false religion. Third, we have the focus of false religion.

I. The Examples of False Religion

A delegation from Jerusalem has come all the way down to Jesus in Galilee. They want to find out if Jesus checks, if He is one of theirs, if He is a Messiah as the Pharisees imagined Messiah. And the first thing their legal eyes spot is that the disciples ate food without washed hands.

In this context, the washing of hands before a meal was not as much the hygiene matter that it is for us today, we who are obsessed with germs and bacteria and infections. Instead, this was a Pharisaic invention that had to do with hyper law-keeping. Nothing in the Law of Moses demanded the washing of hands before every meal. The Pharisees had developed their own set of laws, which were supposed to be fences around the original Law of Moses. And along the way, they had developed an elaborate system of laws around hand-washing before meals. The hands had to be immersed in water, and only after the one had been immersed could that hand begin rubbing the other hand. The hands needed to be wet to the wrist, or else it was not considered washed. Not only so, but the hands were to be washed after the meal as well. Beyond that, the washing extended to the vessels and cups that touched food, or if a person had been to the marketplace where food had been present.

For the Pharisees, this tradition had become their own law. If someone did not carry out this ritual washing, he was ritually unclean, which to them, was as much as sinning. In fact, they thought of their own traditions as more important than Scripture. One of the rabbinic writings said, "It is a greater offence to teach anything contrary to the voice of the Rabbis than to contradict Scripture itself."

Here this party of Pharisees had come up to find some official act of lawbreaking by Jesus. If they could do that, then it would mean that He was a sinner, not Messiah, and could possibly even be arrested and put to death. By this time, the Pharisees had begun plotting how to put Jesus to death.

Perhaps they caught Jesus' disciples in the act of eating food without their prescribed ritual washing. But more than likely, word had spread that Jesus had fed over 20 000 people in one go. And I'm quite sure that when those people sat down in groups of fifties and hundreds on the green grass, they did not all wash each hand up to the wrist and follow the Pharisees' little ritual. They thanked God, and ate. Either way, they think they have caught Jesus out. His disciples do not wash their hands, proof that their teacher Himself was careless and not a keeper of their rabbinic laws.

So they come to him with a question which is actually an accusation: *"Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"*

When Jesus replies, He does not give them an explanation of the disciples' behaviour, but a condemnation of their own.

II. The Authority of False Religion

⁶ *He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. ⁷ And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'*

Jesus would upset a lot of our modern views of niceness and tolerance. We think we must always agree to disagree and speak kindly about heretics, apostates and those who lead people on to Hell. But Jesus did no such thing. He loved His father. He loved the truth. He loved people, and so He hated the doctrine of the Pharisees. He called the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies a people who outwardly speak of their devotion to God, but inwardly are cold to Him.

They were hypocrites, play-actors. It is not that they were genuine believers who fell short. It is not that they were genuine believers tempted to impress others. No, they were through and through play-actors, performing an act for the applause of men. Worst of all, they had replaced God's script, with their own.

Jesus said they had done four things:

- 1) They taught their own commandments as God's Word. ⁷ *And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*

Now there is nothing wrong with a man-made rule. I have man-made rules at home about table manners, about bed-time, about how many sugars in my coffee. Nothing wrong with rules in their place. Nothing wrong with rules made by men in government. Nothing wrong with man-made rules in schools, in work-places, and even in churches. We can't make life work without them. The problem is that the Pharisees took their rules, which were supposed to help believers obey God's Word, and they taught them as if they *were* God's Word. They bound men's consciences to rules of their own making, and said, this is right and wrong, this is sin and righteousness.

Nothing wrong with rules, and when you meet someone who says that Christianity has no rules, get in your car and drive the opposite direction from that person as far as you can. Scripture is full of commandments. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." The problem is when authority shifts, and a man-made rule is given to people as if it were God's Word.

- 2) They replaced God's Word. ⁸ *"For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men -- the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.*

Once they had taught that their own rules were God's Word, they simply began to elbow out God's actual, inspired Word. Once you're in love with your own voice, you begin to turn down the volume

on God's.

- 3) They rejected God's Word. ⁹ *He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition."*

They inserted their own commandments, treated them as inspired, elbowed out God's Word, until it was clear that they were rejecting it altogether in favour of their own tradition.

Nothing wrong with tradition. Everyone has a tradition. Paul told Timothy to teach faithful men who would be able to teach others also – that's a tradition. Nothing wrong with handing things down from one generation to another. It all depends on what you're handing down. If you hand down the truth, then tradition helps you. If you hand down a lie, then the tradition is preserving and perpetuating falsehood. That's what they were doing, and to a large degree, it is what modern Judaism continues to do.

- 4) They made the Word of God of no effect. ¹³ *"making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."*

Having bumped it, replaced it, and rejected, God's authority had been de-clawed, de-fanged, disarmed.

That was the issue – real authority. Biblical religion has allowed God to be the authority through His Word. The Pharisees had the audacity to put their own words ahead of God's, and ignore His altogether. Jesus then gave a real life illustration of how they would do this.

Scripture said that children are to honour father and mother, and to even speak evil of them was punishable by death. That was God's authority, God's Word. That was the true religion.

The Pharisees had come up with another plan. If you did not want to support your parents financially in their old age, you could declare all that money to be *Corban*, which literally means, a gift, an offering, All that money was now dedicated for God's use, and for the Temple. The thing is, you didn't have to take it there immediately. You could continue to live off it, and spend it, and then whatever remained after you died would go to the Temple. Nice little arrangement to cater to human greed, and to encourage impiety towards your own parents. Declare the money strictly for God's use, and so unavailable to needy parents, but use it for yourself until you die. Here was a foolish, if not wicked tradition, which had been taught as if it were God's Word, replaced God's Word, rejected God's Word and robbed God's Word of its power.

These men obeyed a different authority, and so theirs was a different religion.

Jesus has made it clear – not My God, not My Bible, not My faith. And now, turning away from these apostates, He turns to the crowd, who must make up their minds between Pharisaic religion and Christ's religion.

He turns the Pharisaic belief on its head. ¹⁴ *When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand: ¹⁵ "There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. ¹⁶ "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!"*

False religion's authority is man-made, and false religion's focus is external. And what did Jesus mean by that? Jesus explained it further to His disciples.

III. The Focus of False Religion

¹⁷ When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. ¹⁸ So He said to them, "Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ "because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" ²⁰ And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. ²¹ "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, ²² "thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. ²³ "All these evil things come from within and defile a man."

Jesus expects that His disciples would have grasped what He meant. Food only enters the stomach, and is then purged out. On the other hand, sin begins in the heart. What comes out of the heart can defile the whole man.

The Pharisees focused on an external religion, with washings and Sabbath observances, and forbidden foods, all of which was external and measurable and controllable, which is what the heart wants. On the other hand, the true religion focuses on the deepest part of man – his loves, desires, priorities, treasures.

Jesus is not saying that nothing that enters your eyes or ears can defile you. This would contradict hundreds of other Scriptures. David said in the psalms, I will set no wicked thing before my eyes. Paul said, avoid all appearance of evil. Music, images, websites do not enter the stomach, they enter the heart.

What Jesus is saying is our biggest problems are not external, circumstantial things. Our biggest problem is not our environment. Our biggest problem is inside us. Our biggest problem is our heart. True religion is not merely interested in dressing up externals.

You see, man is a worshipper. That's what distinguishes him from the animals. His deepest problems are rooted in his heart, in his refusal to love God. He is made in God's image, has been made to worship, and when a creature is given capacities to know and understand and love the Creator, great is the fall of the creature when it turns away from God in pride! All those capacities for adoration, exquisite abilities for reflection, and a deeply refined sense of affections – when these turn dark, when these turn inward, when these turn to focus on creature rather than Creator, the fall is great and calamitous.

In fact, Jesus gives us a gruesome, painful list of what now resides in the human heart.

Evil thoughts – wicked reasoning, **adulteries** – all kinds of marital unfaithfulness, **fornications** – any form of sexual immorality, **murders, thefts, covetousness** -greed, **wickedness**- intentional maliciousness, **deceit** - all forms of lying, deceit, fraud, **lewdness**- sensuality, debauchery, licentiousness, **an evil eye** – envy and jealousy, **blasphemy, pride, foolishness**. - spiritual and moral insensitivity. ²³ *"All these evil things come from within and defile a man."*

Do you understand what Jesus is saying? Contrary to what most believe, no one makes you commit murder, or steal or be immoral. These things are already in the heart. Circumstance or temptation just brings to the surface what is already there. The hot water doesn't create the taste, it just brings out whatever is already in the tea-bag. The environment doesn't create sin, it reveals it. Your boss doesn't make you angry, it reveals the anger that is there. Your neighbour's fancy car doesn't make you envy, it brings out the envy already in your heart. The filth on TV or the Internet didn't make you lust and commit mental adultery, it just fed and fuelled the adultery already in your heart. Your

poverty didn't make you envious or greedy, it just brought out the greed and envy present. Your wealth didn't make you envious or greedy or proud, it just brought out what was already there.

This is the true religion. It says, not on man's authority, but on God's, that the problem is the heart. The heart is above all things deceitful and desperately wicked. It says man's primary need is a new heart: an act of God, forgiving a man of his sins, justifying him, and giving him a new heart, with new desires, new loves.

True religion deals with the heart – you need a new heart from God, and you need to spend the rest of your life repenting of and replacing the remnants of the old.

False religion always thinks that the problem is outside. It thinks if you can control or modify the externals – the right architecture, the right liturgy, the right code, then man will come right – but it does not deal with the most unpleasant truth – that the first and primary problem is in the heart.

And before you think the problem is with that ornate church down the road, where incense is being burnt before icons. It can happen in the house church down the road where everyone arrives in jeans and t-shirts and watches a DVD or debates what this verse means to me. All fine, but no one is dealing with the heart – what do we love most, what do we treasure most? Why does pride, and anger, and impatience, and sexual immorality and greed still control us?

Modern psychology, which is like a religion to many people, always thinks the problem is dealt with through modifying externals – busyness of life, dealing with self-esteem, changing guilt feeling. While it might take a stab at dealing with internal thoughts and attitudes, it will still steer clear of Christ's conclusion, that there is resident sin, indwelling sin, sin that is present that will manifest unless dealt with by Christ, His cross, His Spirit.

The world thinks man's problem is external to him and can be remedied with education, better jobs, and a more democratic society. Supposedly man is good, and if every person on Earth could enjoy an upper-middle class income and lifestyle, everyone would treat everyone else fairly, justly and equitably. The only reason man steals, murder, envies, cheats, deceives, is because he is poor, deprived, disadvantaged. No politician, no educational model, no social program will ever say that the problem is selfishness in the human heart.

Sometimes Christians have this same, wrong-headed view of the human heart. Occasionally you meet parents who think that if they carefully control all the influences coming into their children's lives, then their children will end up righteous. They don't say it in as many words, but that's the thinking. I'll homeschool, I'll make sure they don't watch TV, I'll control which friends they have, and by the time my child is 20 they'll be spotlessly pure.

And let me say, I do think you should strictly control what goes into your child's “eargate” and “eyegate”. I do think that you should be very careful about who will become key influences on your child as far as friends and peers go. And yes, if you put a boot through your TV, I won't shed a tear for your child.

But understand, you cannot shelter your children from the sin in their own hearts. There is enough resident sin in your child's heart to destroy him. He has resident immorality, adultery, theft, pride in there. He is not a nice clean, blank slate of holiness which you must keep from mud splattering on it. He is a descendant of Adam. He is a sinner. Given temptation and opportunity, it comes out.

Once you understand that evil is already in the heart, you will come to realise that it doesn't need any help, so don't fuel it. You will focus your efforts around driving children to the Cross, teaching them to love Christ, and to walk in the Spirit so they can fight the resident sin in their own hearts for the rest of their lives - when you aren't there with the remote control, or controlling what websites visit.

The true faith deals with the heart, not just with the environment. It deals with the heart's idols, not merely with the circumstances, the atmosphere, the influences. Christ's religion says, it's not just what is around you. It's not just what goes in you. It's what's already in you – that's what you have to deal with.

Unless you deal with the heart, all of religion's forms and rules are just putting lipstick on a pig. They are just dressing a monkey in a tuxedo. The depraved, sinful human heart needs something more than washing the hands, or memorising the Ten Commandments, or getting Mass once a week, or avoiding R-rated movies. It needs a new heart, a heart given to those who come to God through Jesus Christ and ask Him for that new heart. They ask for forgiveness, a new life, a new start.

In some way, most religions are the same. Their authority is the commandments and traditions of men. And you can tell they are man-made because they leave untouched that part of man he most wants to protect: his own desires and loves. It keeps everything external and superficial.

One religion, the true religion, is based on God's own Testimony in the Word – the 66 inspired books of the Bible. And its message, while not popular, is the message we need – our problem is in our hearts. We were made to be worshippers, and are idolaters instead. Christ came, not to give us another external religion, but to call us to heart-repentance, for a new life of loving the Lord our God, with all our heart, soul, and mind.