**Mark’s Gospel: *Jesus and the Kingdom***

**Sunday November 3, 2019**

**Mark #9: “*It’s What’s Inside that Counts”* (Mark 7:1-23)**

**1. Introduction: *Skating to Church***

Many years ago a pastor woke up to find that the roads were blocked with snow one Sunday morning. Since he couldn’t drive his car to church, he was forced to skate on the river to get to church. When he arrived the deacons of the church were horrified that their preacher had skated on the Lord's Day. After the service they held a meeting where the pastor explained that it was either skate to church or not go at all. Finally one deacon asked, “Did you enjoy skating on the river this morning?” When the preacher answered, “No,” the deacons’ board decided it was no longer a problem.

This little anecdote illustrates the complex web of rules that Christians attach to their faith. Many of you could probably tell me a few stories of the various rules that you have encountered within the church. No dancing, no drinking, no movies, no playing cards. This morning’s Gospel lesson centers on an argument between Jesus and the Pharisees on the issue of religious rules. In this tense exchange Jesus gets to the heart of the matter and emphasizes that it’s what’s inside that counts.

**2. The Pharisees’ Critique**

Jesus’ disciples had been travelling throughout Galilee, preaching and healing and enjoying the hospitality of anyone who opened their homes to them. They likely ate whatever food was offered to them and perhaps they didn’t keep kosher. With their focus on the work of the kingdom, they weren’t concerned about the required ritual washings before sitting down to eat with their hosts. In the eyes of the Pharisees and the experts in religious law, this was not right, so they confronted Jesus about the behaviour of his disciples. They asked him, “*Why don’t your disciples follow our age-old tradition?* *They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony”* (Mark 7:5).

Some explanation about the background to the Pharisee’s critique is necessary. In fact, Mark’s first readers, who were likely non-Jews or Gentiles, also required some explanation for this practice (Mark 7:3-4). The Pharisees were a sub-group within first century Judaism who strived to make God’s law applicable to every facet of life and their rules were intended to ensure that God’s law was being meticulously observed. Their aim was to apply the ancient text to their particular context in first century Palestine. For instance, in the Old Testament, God commands his people to keep the Sabbath holy and to rest from their work. But the Pharisees felt in order to keep this commandment, more clarity was needed so they formulated specific rules around what could and couldn’t be done on the Sabbath. The issue of Sabbath keeping was behind some of the clashes that Jesus had with the Pharisees (Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-8). A natural outcome of the Pharisees’ interpretation of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) was a set of teachings called the Oral Law to stand alongside the Written Law.

The practice of ritual or ceremonial washing represented the Pharisees’ attempt to apply the priestly purification laws of the Torah to everyday people. According to the Torah, the priests were required to wash their hands ceremonially before going into the Tabernacle. This marked the movement from the ordinary or unclean world into the sacred or pure environment of the Tabernacle. This practice of ceremonial hand washing prior to meals was part of the overall Pharisaic attempt to live in a state of priestly purity. It was not a matter of getting the real dirt off your hands; it was a matter of symbolically removing the pollution of the world from yourself. The Pharisees were trying to live out a practical holiness that demonstrated their devotion to a holy God.

The intent of the Pharisees to make the Scriptures applicable to daily life was a good goal, but the result was not so great. The Pharisees were not bad guys, but they were so deeply entrenched in their religious world, that they were unable to understand or accept the new thing that was happening when Jesus appeared on the scene. Jesus, a faithful Jew, did not tow the party line on their key issues. He healed on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6), had meals with sinners and unclean people (Mark 2:13-17), didn’t encourage his disciples to fast (Mark 2:18-22), and didn’t enforce the practice of ceremonial hand washing prior to meals (Mark 7:1-5). In their eyes, Jesus and his disciples were not faithful Jews.

**3. Jesus’ Response**

So, this religious delegation confronted Jesus about his disciples’ disregard for their age-old religious tradition (Mark 7:5). The question itself reveals a flawed attitude on their part. They seemed to have a feeling of religious superiority over the unclean masses and the lackadaisical Jews in their society. Championing this particular understanding of Scripture, they were openly critical of those who did not share their approach. So, they questioned the disciples’ devotion to God because they didn’t engage in this particular religious ritual.

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ question was two-fold. His initial reaction went to the very heart of the matter, their *age-old religious tradition*, which formed the basis for their critique of the disciples (Mark 7:6-13). The second part of his reply addressed the particulars of their criticism, the question of *ritual purity* (Mark 7:14-23).

The *age-old tradition* of the Pharisees was comprised of the religious instructions of revered teachers of the past, who were known as the *elders*. The *tradition of the elders* formed the basis for much of the Pharisees’ religious practice. So right off the bat, Jesus questions the validity of this age-old tradition by applying the words of the prophet Isaiah to his opponents (Mark 7:6-7).

“*These people honor me with their lips,  
     but their hearts are far from me.  
 Their worship is a farce,  
     for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God*” (Isaiah 29:13).

The Isaiah passage pointed out two crucial problems with their approach - their religious traditions didn’t represent God’s will and their outward practice was not matched by a heart-felt devotion to God. These two key contrasts, outward action versus inward disposition and man-made rules versus commands from God, form the basis of Jesus’ criticism.

While the Pharisees’ tradition may have been a well-intentioned interpretation and application of God’s word, it could never be a replacement of it. Yet the Pharisees were doing just that. They were presenting human-made rules as directives from God himself. They were *ignoring God’s law and substituting it with their own tradition* (Mark 7:8). Whenever humans interpret Scripture, the problem of selective reading always occurs. All of us have our favourite parts of the Bible that we naturally gravitate to. This same problem was present within the age-old tradition of the Pharisees as certain commandments were stressed over others. At times their emphasis upon particular commandments led to the violation of other commandments.

Jesus accused the Pharisees of *skilfully sidestepping God’s law in order to hold on to their own tradition* (Mark 7:9). Backing up his claim, he presented a prime example of this (Mark 7:10-13). The Pharisees’ emphasis upon the permanence of the vow to devote one’s possessions to God was in direct conflict with the fifth commandment to honour your parents. If one so chose to, a person could declare his or her possessions to be an offering to God, which meant that they could no longer be given to anyone else, even one’s parents. While the age-old tradition stressed the importance of keeping one’s vow to God, it ignored God’s command to care for one’s parents. Such is the limitation of any human approach to God’s word; it often fails to see Scripture in its wholeness.

After exposing the weaknesses of the Pharisees’ tradition, Jesus turned his attention to the issue that started this discussion, *ritual purity*. His declaration to the crowd (Mark 7:15) and his later explanation to his disciples (Mark 7:18-23) emphasized the same message – “*It’s not what you swallow that pollutes your life; it’s what you vomit—that’s the real pollution*” (*The Message*). Purity is not a matter of something external, like food, but it’s the bad stuff that’s in your heart that comes out and hurts yourself and others. Food goes into your stomach and eventually ends up in the sewer. But the real impurity is in people’s hearts. This bad stuff gets vomited out and causes all kinds of damage in our relationships, our families, in our neighbourhoods and in our world. Jesus described the toxic stuff that comes out of the human heart – “*evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder,**adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness*” (Mark 7:21-22). “All these are vomit from the heart. *There* is the source of your pollution” (Mark 7:23, *The Message*). Jesus went to the heart of the matter and taught us that *it’s what’s inside that counts*.

**4. The Implications for Us**

So, what do we do with this challenging passage of Scripture? Do we relegate it to the first century, saying, “*This business about ritual hand-washing has not application to me whatsoever*”? While this episode from Mark’s Gospel had a context in the life of Jesus and later on in the life of the church, its resonance continues to echo for us. Jesus’ citation of Isaiah 29:13 hits me where I live – “*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”* It’s so easy to keep up appearances. To look good on the outside and to hide what’s really going on in the inside. Maybe that was the appeal of those external, visible religious practices that the Pharisees stressed. One could do those things and appear to be pure, while masking the impurity that was within one’s heart. I’m not saying that we should dispense with the outward activities that we engage in as Christians, such as attending church, praying, giving our offerings, or taking communion. But we need to be aware of the temptation to look religious on the outside, when we’re full of gunk on the inside. We need to be honest to God and to others about the condition of our soul and be open to God’s purifying work in our lives. God wants to clean you up on the inside, so that what comes out is good.

At the same time, we need to allow God’s grace to work in the lives of those around us. Oftentimes we seem to take an assembly line approach to discipleship. Creating a generic Christian based on our cultural ideas of what a Christian should look like, instead of allowing God to work in each person to bring about true Christ-likeness. We can become judgmental of people, demanding that they immediately conform our expectations. Instead, we need to see others as accepted because of what Christ has done and guided by the Holy Spirit, who brings real change in their lives. We need to cease putting up these man-made walls of tradition that are designed to keep people out and become more like Jesus, who loved and welcomed those who were rejects and outcasts in his society.

We need to be open to the purifying work of God in our lives and allow him to clean up the mess in our hearts so that we can be gracious, loving and forgiving toward others.

*Purify my heart/Cleanse me from within/And make me holy  
Purify my heart/Cleanse me from my sin/Deep within*

*(*Graham Kendrick, *Refiner’s Fire)*