

## Truth tackles Tradition

- Mark 7:1-8
- I know we did not talk about the last passage in chapter 6. We see the compassion of Jesus as he healed all who came to him. And we see people running about the whole region, Mark says, bringing sick people they knew to be near Jesus. They would lay the sick people in the marketplaces and begged Jesus to let them touch even the hem of his garment. Again, a very Jewish picture of a Rabbi wearing a robe that had tassels on the four corners. The last verse of chapter 6 tells us all that we need to know: "And as many as touched it were made well." But, as we see in this passage today, *this* Rabbi is different. The Pharisees already know this, and it drives them crazy. Here we see they have come down from Jerusalem to spy out this troublemaker, this man who is gaining popularity and rousing the rabble, as it were. And they are troubled...maybe delighted to see that some of his disciples eat with defiled hands, hands that have NOT been washed! Let's learn from Jesus again today by looking at this text in three parts: the question, the mask, the tragic life.
- **The Question** (verse 5)
- "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"
- Notice the accusation imbedded in the question. Why do *your* disciples...? Clearly, Jesus, if they are *your* disciples, they are being misled. But...why this question in the first place? Are we commanded by God to wash our hands before we eat? No. There is a good hygiene reason to do so but there is no moral imperative to do so. Not for us. Not for Jesus and his disciples. Not for Christians ever since. But the Pharisees thought this was a violation. Why?
- Mark explains this in verses 3-4 since he is writing to a Gentile audience. The key phrase is in verse 3, that they do not eat unless they wash because of "the tradition of the elders." What is that?
- This refers to the oral tradition, which was a defining element of Pharisaic and rabbinic Judaism. Pharisees accepted and embraced an evolving oral law as equally authoritative as the written law of the Torah. Their accusation that Jesus' disciples ate with unclean hands could not be proven by examining the Torah, the written law. It's not there. It could only be supported by the oral tradition, and rabbis believed that Moses had actually received two sets of laws on Mt. Sinai, the written Torah and the unwritten Mishnah. They believed that the Torah was the policy that God laid down, and the Mishnah was the explanation of how it was to be followed.
- What did the oral tradition in Jesus' time say about hand washing before a meal?
- Here's what I found by way of explanation for this practice of ritual cleansing, still religiously followed today by Orthodox Jews. This information is from a Jewish website called "The Mitzvah Minute." Do this only before eating a meal with bread or matzah. Bread is considered the staple food of all foods. Potatoes just missed the boat. This may sound strange, but before washing your hands, be sure that they are clean and free of anything that will obstruct the waters from reaching the entire surface of your hand. Remove your rings—unless you never remove them, in which case they are considered "part of your hand." Fill a cup with water and pour twice on your right hand. Repeat on

the left (lefties: reverse the order). The custom is to do this three times on each hand. Make sure the water covers your entire hand up to the wrist bone with each pour. Separate your fingers slightly to allow the water in between them. One rabbi says, "Don't skimp. Fill your hands with water and God will fill them with His goodness." After washing, lift your hands chest-high and say: *Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us concerning the washing of the hands.*

[Say this blessing only if you intend to eat more than two ounces of bread.] Rub your hands together and then dry them. Be careful not to speak or get involved in anything else until you've blessed your bread and swallowed some too. (***That*** is a tradition of the elders.)

- This is not to say that all traditions are bad. Many times, though, we misunderstand why we do things the way we do, and we begin to think that our way *must be* the right way. I remember the story of the woman who would cut her Thanksgiving turkey in half and cook each half at a time. Her daughter observed this ritual every year and finally when she was 15 years-old she asked her mother why she did that, since it took twice as long. She told her daughter that was the way her mother did it, and that it must be the right way to prepare a turkey. But that made her wonder, so she called her and asked why she always cut the turkey in half. Her mother laughed and say, "Well, I didn't have a pan big enough to cook the whole turkey in! I *had* to cut it in half." That's a tradition of the mothers.
- The Pharisees were all in on washing the hands and the pots and the pans. We can see from Jesus' response to the Pharisees, though, that he is not impressed at all with externalism, living by a life of rules and regulations to keep the outside clean and doing nothing about the heart. He calls them hypocrites.
- **The Mask (verse 6)**
- He goes straight to the heart of the problem, which is hypocrisy. What is a hypocrite? The word literally described for the Greeks a man who wore a mask and acted out a part on the stage. Actors were hypocrites because they were pretending to be something that they were not. How many times have we seen someone in a movie play a part that moved us to tears because of their sacrificial love or their courage under fire or their selfless stand for righteousness...and then we read in the paper the next week that the actor who moved us to tears was arrested for drunk driving or accused of cheating on his wife or worse? We shake our heads at that, but we know that the actor is just playing a role, performing a part that really had nothing to do with who he really is. What happens, though, when that hypocrisy shows up in the church? What happens when someone claims to know God and that person is really a hypocrite? This is a frightening passage of Scripture for us, because I think Jesus is warning us about how easy it is to slip into playing a role. Perhaps the more of a commitment you have made to follow Jesus and to serve him, the greater the temptation to slip on the mask when you fail or when you are struggling. What should we do instead? Jesus said it: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." The Jews were heavy laden by all the burdens the traditions of the elders placed on them, and we are heavy laden by the burden of our guilt when we don't do everything we are supposed to. What does Jesus do when we come to him? He welcomes us. He gives us rest by reminding us

that he is our advocate before the Father when we sin and that we have already received forgiveness and restoration through the blood he shed. He rejoices over us with singing. He delights to meet our need and carry our burden for us. That's IF we take off the mask and come to him.

- A rather pompous-looking man was endeavoring to impress upon a class of boys the importance of living the Christian life. "Why do people call me a Christian?" the man asked. After a moment's pause, one youngster said, "Ummm, maybe it's because they don't know you?" I am not trying to make light of something that is very serious: not a week goes by that we do not hear about this church leader or that pastor or this influential person in the community who appeared to be a follower of Christ but has been living a lie for many years and the mask has been pulled off and the ugly heart has been exposed.
- The Pharisees are hypocrites, but let's not misunderstand here: Jesus is not accusing them of being uncommitted. He does not say they have a lack of dedication. No, they are badly mistaken, wrong in their approach to the law and to God's will, but they were dead set on pursuing this course and leading others to do the same...which makes what they were doing even more dangerous. A lazy hypocrite is one thing, but a committed hypocrite is deadly. It leads to...
- **A tragic life (verses 6b-8)**
- Hypocrisy is one evidence of a tragic life. It is one thing to wear a mask on our face because of a virus. It is quite a different thing to wear a mask on our hearts. It is the heart God is most concerned with.
- **Their hearts were far from God.** Jesus said their lips were doing great, but their hearts were in another galaxy. Their lives were regulated by religious exercises, but they were only serving themselves in those exercises. When our hearts are far from God it is because we have set them on ourselves. When our hearts are beating properly, our desires are to love God and to serve others.
- **They taught and held onto tradition (the word of man) rather than the Word of God.**
- We practice and teach what we truly believe, so if what we truly believe is not true, we are in trouble and we bring others into that trouble with us. That's what we have the Scriptures for. That's what we have teachers for. That's what we have elders for. That's why we have each other and close relationships where we are known on the heart level.
- Prayer
- **Communion**
- Baby Dedication: **Clara Joy Heafner**