

The Heart of the Problem

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 March 2022

Preacher: Simon Attwood

[0 : 00] The Gospel of Mark, Chapter 7. The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

Now the Pharisees and all the Jews don't eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.

When they come from the marketplace, they don't eat unless they wash, and they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles.

And 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?

And Jesus replied, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it's written, these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

[1 : 17] They worship me in vain. Their teachings are merely human rules. You've let go of the commandments of God and are holding on to human traditions.

And he continued, you have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions. For Moses said, honor your father and mother, and anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.

But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is korban, that is, devoted to God, then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. And thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you've handed down. And you do many things like that. Again, Jesus called the crowd to him and said, listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it's what comes out of a person that defiles them. After he left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.

[2 : 43] Are you so dull, he asked. Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their hearts, but into their stomach and then out of the body.

In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean. And he went on, what comes out of a person is what defiles them. For from within, out of a person's heart, it is that evil thoughts come.

Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.

All these evils come from inside and they defile a person. Thanks be to God.

Well, good morning. And let me add my welcome to Martin's.

[3 : 49] My name is Simon. I am the training minister here. If you could keep your Bibles open at page 1010, that would be a great help. And let's ask for God's help as we dig into his word this morning.

Father God, you speak through your word by your spirit. We ask that you would open up our hearts and minds to receive your word to us this morning.

Help us to know that the Lord Jesus is better and to take his word and instructions into our hearts and into our lives. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I want to start this morning by talking about words that we almost never use in day-to-day speech.

It's a word that brings out anxiety and fear in many people. A word that we would never like to hear applied to ourselves. And that word is defiled.

It's something is defiled, it's damaged, it's unclean, it's broken, it's impure, it is shameful. It's a word with basically only negative connotations.

[4 : 55] If something is defiled, it may not be safe, it may spread its defilement to others. People believe that some things are defiled and that aren't fit for normal life, and welcome in polite society not to be talked about.

Defiled is a really uncomfortable word. But it's certainly a concept that we understand. We don't need to be taught it. Often from an early age, that feeling of shame and of being wrong and of being other is very present with us.

Any child who's bullied at school knows that feeling of being the outsider, the rejected one, the one who isn't welcome. And defilement is really serious. It's the kind of word people use to describe the worst types of crimes that happen to a person.

It may be even a word that some of us, if we're honest, end up using in our own minds for ourselves at our worst moments. Some of us don't need to be told that we are defiled.

Even those words might have been applied to us by others. And that's a word that comes up in our passage quite a bit today. The Bible has a lot to say about defilement that maybe comes as no surprise to some of us.

[6 : 03] Maybe if you've not been to church much before, you might assume that maybe the Bible says mainly stuff about defilement and almost nothing else. But in the Old Testament, the categories of clean or unclean, holy and unholy, the boundaries that define God's people are related to that idea of defilement.

God's people, his holy people Israel, are called to be like him. And holiness is a moral category. The people are called to be devoted to God. And for ancient Israel, part of that holiness was following God's command about what makes a person ceremonially clean or unclean.

There are many things that can make a person unclean and therefore have to separate themselves off from public life. That concept of clean, unclean, holy and unholy is two different concepts, though.

Something unclean didn't make you unholy specifically. To disobey God and turn against him, however, did. To be cleansed, a person needs to bring a sacrifice so that guilt and shame could be taken away and substituted.

So our question as we dig into our passage this morning with that big, quite heavy term of defilement is, well, what did that mean in Jesus' day? What did Jesus have to say about that?

[7 : 23] And what does that mean for us? And as we go through this passage, we'll be looking at the teaching of the religious leaders in Jesus' day and then Jesus' teaching under two kind of main ideas.

Where does the problem come from and what is the solution? Now, some of you may have heard of a guy called John Ronson. He is an author.

He's quite popular. He does a lot of podcasts, a lot of radio shows. And he has written an awful lot of books. But he wrote a book about a decade ago called *So You Have Been Publicly Shamed*. It's a really interesting book. And it's looked at how in the modern media age, the idea of a public shaming has kind of come back from where it was in history. He interviewed seven people who had been publicly shamed in some way.

And he has a lot of interesting things to put forward in that book about why that happens and how those people feel. But I just want to pick one quote from that book. And John Ronson says about society, we are defining the boundaries of normality by tearing apart the people outside of it.

[8 : 30] And he's talking about that all-too-human tendency to define the in-crowd by criticizing and tearing apart the out-crowd.

The people on the inside are welcome, and therefore they are the good people. And the people on the outside are problematic, dangerous, maybe even defiled. Now, 2,000 years ago, there certainly was an in-crowd who loved to tell people on the outside that they were defiled and unwelcome.

And they did so loudly, and they did so very publicly. And those in this passage here are the Pharisees. Now, last time we saw them in Mark's Gospel, Jesus had been disagreeing with them publicly, showing up their lack of understanding of the God they supposedly spoke for.

And after a confrontation with the Pharisees in Mark chapter 3, Mark tells us that the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

These Pharisees have already decided that Jesus is wrong, that he is unworthy, and actually he is a problem to be gotten rid of. But a few chapters later, here in chapter 7, the Pharisees have had to travel 100 miles north to get to this area of Galilee.

[9 : 51] It's a more mixed, more Gentile area than Jerusalem would be. And just to prove Jesus wrong, they've brought the big guns with them, the teachers of the law.

Think kind of professors and PhDs of Jewish law. They have turned up to tell Jesus publicly that he is wrong. And so no surprise, when they turn up, the first thing they do is find Jesus' followers and find Jesus and immediately criticize.

So have a look down at verse 5. Immediately, they are questioning Jesus about what his followers eat and why. Why don't you disciples live according to the traditions of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?

And so it's very clear from the get-go. These people think the heart of the problem is external. Something needs clean. Something can be washed off.

The problem with you, the thing that makes you unwelcome, the thing that makes you defiled, is external. And it's worth pointing out that Mark gives an awful lot of airtime in verses 2 to 4 to explaining all the different bits of how the Pharisees would wash things, the traditions that had been handed down.

[11 : 05] They would wash after coming in from the marketplace because that's a place where they'd have to mix with Gentiles and other people. And they wouldn't even eat when they came back before they'd wash themselves clean of the defiled other people they'd be near.

So this is something that any of the readers of Mark's Gospel would understand. And people in the crowds listening to this would really understand this because it would just look so convincing.

The Pharisees look holy. They look impressive. They look like the right religious people. They are so pious. The official clothing, the power, the further, the zeal.

They just look correct, don't they? But then Jesus, in the strongest possible terms, tells them and tells the whole crowd with them that this whole thing is a total sham.

It's all for show. And not only that, but it's in direct conflict with God's Word. Look down at what he says in verse 6. Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites.

[12 : 10] Jesus says that this prophecy from Isaiah, hundreds of years prior, was directly about the Pharisees in his day. They're hypocrites. They're people who say one thing but do another.

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain. Their teachings are merely human rules. These people claim to represent God and claim to teach the people his law and communicate on God's behalf.

But according to Jesus and according to God's Word through Isaiah, the Pharisees are literally and figuratively so far from the truth. These socially constructed rules that have been added on to God's law over generations and generations, all of this tradition meant to make people be more holy, well, it's all in vain.

These are just holy-sounding words. And in reality, the hearts of these religious leaders are immensely far from God. See verse 8, they have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.

What a damning indictment of Israel's religious leaders with their positions and power. All they've done is led people astray. They go around telling everyone else that everyone else is defiled, but they are the good people.

[13 : 36] They are on the right side of God. And to give an example of this, Jesus picks out the teaching of Corban in verses 9 to 12. Now, what is this?

Well, the teaching was that although God's law clearly stated that people must honor their father and mother and that there were significant consequences for not doing so, the elders of Israel have invented a new rule, essentially saying, well, just devote what should be used to help your family to the temple, to the religious establishment, ultimately to them.

Give your money, your time, and your energy to God by giving it to us, not your family. Just think for one second. In an ancient farming community, if you have elderly parents, what that actually does. They can't help themselves. They're reliant on their adult children to provide for them. And if the adult children take everything away from that and devote it to the temple, then what hope do these elderly parents have?

Israel's leaders are advocating for this teaching and saying, this is what God wants from you, but it's in total conflict with what God has actually said. But the problem is, it looks so holy, doesn't it?

[14 : 53] Do the holy thing. Do the right thing. This is what it means to take your faith seriously. But hear the strength of Jesus' accusations to the Pharisees getting stronger and stronger through

these verses.

Verse 8, you have let go of the commands of God. Verse 9, you have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God. And verse 13, you nullify the word of God by your traditions that you've handed down and do many things like that.

The Corbin thing is essentially just the tip of the iceberg. You could just look at all the things the Pharisees are doing and see this attitude goes further and further down. They've ignored God for the sake of their traditions and their teaching goes right to the core of Israel's religious life.

Those teachings say that the big problem is ceremonial defilement. And so the solution is human rules. If you follow them and their teaching, then you can be in the in crowd.

Otherwise, you're part of the unwashed masses. And it's amazing how religious these people get about something as small as hand-washing. And yet Jesus tells us that it's one big effort in rejecting God and setting aside to the real internal problem.

[16:10] And the scary thing is, it's swayed so many people. Now, that might feel a little hard to translate today because we just don't have Pharisees.

We don't have people flowing around in big religious robes telling us to wash our hands continuously. But there are Pharisee-style attitudes absolutely everywhere.

There are so many things out in the world that would tell us that it's right to be self-righteous if you're getting it right. And that actually other people need to be told that they are getting it wrong. People who really believe that if you follow all the right human rules, then you're getting it right. And actually you are in a position to tell others that they are wrong. I think we sometimes expect to look at the world outside of the church and just see complete chaos.

But a lot of the time we find a surprisingly moralistic world. A world telling you that you can be declared good and right. But God's got nothing to do with that. People are always ready to tell us that we are defiled, that we've got the wrong opinions, the wrong attitude, the wrong political views, the wrong lifestyle, the wrong stuff.

[17:22] And that can sometimes just look so convincing. But with every single one of them, the problem is always that it never goes internally. The problem is always on the outside.

Think about all the messages that you hear. The problem is people who won't go green if only there are more fines for recycling. The problem is inequality. Let's tax the rich. The problem is unhealthy living.

Let's ban unhealthy food. The problem is traditional morality. Let's throw off the last generation's restraints. The problem is the wrong political opinions. Let's cancel those we disagree with.

And every single time, the problem is out there. And the solution is a human rule. And the problem is those things lead us astray all the time. They seem so compelling.

But there always seems to be a new inequality, a new disaster, another greedy politician. These rules, structures and philosophies and ideas don't seem to get us far.

[18:20] They all vie for our attention but end up distracting us, sometimes even purposely from the bigger problem. Because underneath every one of those issues, something is still wrong.

And not just wrong with the world out there, but wrong with us and with our hearts. If only it were so simple that we could find that one big problem, a silver bullet solution, and everything would be fine. But I think often people are haunted by the suspicion that even if you do change the circumstances, unless you change the people, things won't get any better. The problem goes far deeper than we'd like it to.

And so we're left with that big question, well, what is the big problem, and how do we fix it? Well, let's move on to the second part of this passage. Now, there's not much point in having a solution unless you can define what the problem is.

It's something that, let's face it, every math teacher has said multiple times. If you get the right answer, but you can't tell me why, that's not good enough. Now, I spend a lot of time doing a lot of cooking.

[19:22] And one of the things I find actually quite entertaining is kitchen gadgets. It's just really interesting going into a shop and staring at a shelf and wondering, what does that actually do? It's nigh on impossible to tell just by looking at some of them what they're meant for.

But if you go to the kitchen bit of Ikea or the big Homeware Island Tesco, you can waste an astonishing amount of time just looking at the thing and thinking, why would a spatula ever be that shape?

Why is that spoon covered in blades? And it's really, really confusing. And sometimes there's just things in life where unless we actually know what the problem is, the solution makes no sense to us. But sometimes that problem is a lot deeper.

Sometimes if I'm walking around with the idea and if I've heard maybe that Jesus died for my sins, but I don't really know what that actually means, what the real problem was in the first place, I can't get all that far.

Now, as we move on to this next bit, we get the last thing that Jesus says to the Pharisees and the crowds. So look down at verse 14 where Jesus tells us what the problem is.

[20 : 28] Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes from out of a person that defiles them.

And this is the last thing he says to the crowd before going and teaching the disciples privately. It's not the external things, but the internal things that defile us.

And that's the last the crowd and the Pharisees are going to get in this chapter. But the clear message is what these Pharisees are telling you is wrong. It's not fixing the problem. But then internally with the disciples, there's a much longer discussion.

Given Jesus' explanation, the disciples, however, seem to think that Jesus means that the food that you eat can't make you unclean, but maybe what you do in the bathroom might.

And they're kind of not really getting it quite yet. Which is why they ask Jesus what it means. And they have the same problem in some ways that the Pharisees and the crowds do, which is that they still can't define the heart of the problem.

[21 : 33] So Jesus goes on to say in verses 18 and 19, that food merely passes through the body and out again. It just has no ability to impact your heart. But before we go on to the last bit of what really is the problem, Mark just gives us a little almost throwaway comment, but it's huge in its implications, in verse 19.

If you look towards the end, in brackets says, in saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean. For faithful Jewish people, defined by their laws and distinctive living, Jesus' teaching has blown the clean-unclean thing out of the water entirely.

Where the Pharisees had begun to conflate the ideas of clean and unclean with holy and unholy, Jesus separates them back out into the right categories again. Nothing that these people eat is going to be the problem.

It's what's going on in their hearts that's the issue. How they obey God. Actually, one of those implications, however, is really good news for us.

It is actually not the external things that defile us. There's a lot of things in this world that might make us feel defiled in some way, but from Jesus' point of view, those aren't the things that are wrong with you.

[22 : 50] What's wrong with us is on the inside. That's actually quite freeing for a lot of things that we might carry around. But the big news for Israel is that one of their greatest social barriers is now down.

If the food laws aren't a problem, then, well, finally, what is? And in verses 20 to 22, we see the answer. In the end, the classic phrase, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

So from verse 21, Jesus says this, For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that the evil thoughts come. Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.

All these evils come from inside and defile a person. What is Jesus' analysis of the human heart? All of these things are signs that, actually, at the very core, something is wrong with us.

That something in us is evil. Now, if you look at this list, you initially might just start to think, well, I'm not a thief, I'm not a murderer, but honestly, as soon as you get to greed, envy, and folly, who's left thinking this doesn't apply to me?

[24 : 05] This is all of us. All of us have this problem. It's not about the things that we do wrong and the bad actions. It's the fact that they come out of a heart that continuously flows out these bad things.

It's our hearts that make us defiled, says Jesus. One really important thing this does is level the playing field for the whole of humanity.

If absolutely no human being anywhere in the whole world at any point in history can say, actually, that list doesn't include me, then that means Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, Pharisees and fishermen, all are brought to the same place.

People with defiled hearts in need of help. The Pharisees think that being unclean makes you unwelcome to God and what you need is external washing and Jesus says, it is your sinful heart that you possess out of which evil flows.

That is what separates you from the holy God and no amount of external cleaning is going to fix that. So my question is, do you agree with Jesus' diagnosis of your biggest problem?

[25 : 19] Because how often do we seek to minimize sin, to say that something else out there is the problem because actually, honestly, that's easier to deal with because that feels fixable and it might feel quite big but I don't have to sit there and go, actually, I'm the problem.

It's what's going on inside me that is the real issue and actually, if the problem was out there, then I could be in control and I could do something and I could fix it but if the problem is in me, then actually, I know that I have no defense.

Jesus' verdict is right and it is absolutely devastating. The right at the core of who I am, at the core of my being, I have a heart that pours out evil. Friends, this is a sobering thought, isn't it, to apply this to ourselves?

To sit here and think, actually, this is who I am. Maybe some of us have a tendency to think that there is something wrong with us and correct but specifically, it's this.

Maybe to those of us who tend to think that we're basically good and don't understand why God would complain, actually, Jesus just tells us how wrong we are. Now, one of my favorite Christian authors, the late Dr. David Powelson, describes sin this way and I think he hits the nail on the head.

[26 : 37] Sin is your worst cancer, your most crippling disability, your most treacherous enemy, your deepest distress and it is the single most destructive force impacting your life.

So if you define the problem, what does Jesus say is the solution? Well, actually, Jesus doesn't tell us here immediately, does it? This passage doesn't end in an obvious answer of how to fix this.

In many ways, Mark is just urging us to read the rest of his gospel. There is an answer there. But the answer isn't going to be anything other than this man, Jesus, is it?

Because if only he knows what the real problem is and only he teaches it clearly, then only he could tell us the real answer. But actually, if you'd been reading this gospel up to this point, you would have seen signs of the answer everywhere.

Jesus is the son of God, the one who comes for the lost and broken and unclean, the one who claims to forgive sin, the one who is Lord, the one bringing about a new covenant, the one who can calm the storm, feed the hungry and heal the sick.

[27 : 43] The whole trajectory of this gospel is it's running towards Jesus' death as a big sacrifice to deal with sinful hearts. And we know that ultimately we've defiled hearts like these.

It's going to cost Jesus his life to purify us and forgive us because we need his heart to be switched of ours. But Jesus says earlier in the gospel that he has not come for the healthy but the sick.

So if we find ourselves to be sick people with defiled hearts, then the heavenly doctor has come for us. And so Jesus calls us to do the opposite of the Pharisees.

To actually listen to God's word. Not to erect human rules to make ourselves feel better but to acknowledge our sinful and defiled hearts. To really know that they are the biggest problem with us. To know that we are those defiled people and yet to bring all of that to him. The one who can help. Sometimes the most important thing you can possibly do is just to repent of trying to fix your own heart and say, Lord I cannot do it.

[28 : 54] I need your help and on my own I can't do anything about this. But the good news for defiled people is that the son of God came to us and came for us and he is willing that we should be clean.

So with that in our minds let's pray. Amen. Father we come before you acknowledging that every one of us has a heart that is far from you unless you change it.

You know our hearts and we want to say sorry for when we reject your verdict. Help us not to be swayed by the world around us but to bring our sinful hearts to you looking for forgiveness and redemption but knowing because you and your son offered it we can confidently receive it that there is always grace and mercy to help us in our time of need.

And we pray this in Jesus name. Amen.