

Kingdom Advancement: What's Wrong With Us? (Part 1)

Mark 7:1-23

There was this illustration I used to hear all the time in high school and college that was intended to promote holiness in us youngsters. It went something like this. There was this king who was hiring a driver and he had several men who were auditioning for the job. It was a mountain kingdom and so the drivers would have to drive the king on mountain roads that had sharp drops and could often be dangerous. The first two of the three drivers drove as fast as they could and as close to the edge of the cliff as they could to prove what good drivers they were to the king. The last driver went very slowly and drove as far from the edge as possible. The king hired the last driver and his reasoning was, I don't want to see how close to the edge I can get, I want to be sure I am safe.

Of course, the application of this to us youngsters was, if you know sin is here, then you should stay as far away from that as possible to avoid it. It sort of made sense to my brain and so there were times I can remember thinking, if I'm supposed to be holy then the best way to accomplish that is to be as strict as possible.

The problem with that illustration and with that line of reasoning is that it completely misses the point of holiness and of sin. Sin is not a cliff that you may fall off if you get too close. That illustration treats sin like it is out there and as long as you can put as much distance as possible between you and it, you will be fine. In reality, sin resides right square in the middle of your heart and holiness is a straightening of what has been bent inside you. It's so vital that we get this right and we have some very clear teaching from Jesus over the next couple of weeks to help us in this area.

So far in the book of Mark we have seen Jesus confronted by various religious leaders, including the Pharisees. This week and next we are going to see an important moment in the book of Mark where the gap between Jesus's understanding of holiness, sin, and God's Word is put in drastic contrast to that of the Pharisees. And I think you will see how absolutely essential it is that you rightly grasp holiness from God's Word. If we get this wrong it will lead us, like the Pharisees, toward complete rejection of Jesus. So, this week we'll be studying Mark 7:1-13 as the first portion of Mark 7:1-23. This section is focused on the

verbal conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and next week will be Jesus' instruction to his disciples about where the problem with sin really lies. But this week we will see **3 miscalculations concerning holiness that lead to rejection of Jesus.**

1. Multiplying Commands (vs. 1-5)

It's been several weeks since we have been in the gospel of Mark, so let's just quickly remember where we are. Jesus is still ministering generally around the Sea of Galilee, but his ministry seems to be expanding out a little bit more. He's doing the same sort of things he did in the first few chapters, but his ministry reach is growing further. This is evidenced by a delegation of religious leaders from Jerusalem. Look at verse 1.

Of course, we've seen religious leaders from Jerusalem before in chapter 3, but this time it appears to be a bigger group of both scribes and Pharisees. We're pretty sure they aren't in the area to learn from Jesus and become followers. So, what do they confront him over this time? Look at verse 2. During the course of watching Jesus they notice that his disciples are not washing their hands before eating.

At first glance this sounds like something you would talk with your small children about, but there's actually something significant happening here. Notice in verse 2 the word defiled. This could be translated unclean. We have talked at length before in our study of Mark about the dynamic of clean and unclean among the Jews.

God's people, the nation of Israel, were to be set apart from those around them. Much of the OT law was intended to maintain a clear distinction between Israel and other nations. And this distinction, or purity, was necessary for Israel to come into the presence of a holy God and worship Him. So, the OT law had various ways that people would become "unclean" and then what they would have to do to become ritually clean again. The accusation here by the Pharisees is that the disciples of Jesus were becoming unclean, or ritually impure, in the course of their activities, and they were failing to take the proper steps, by washing hands, of becoming ritually clean again.

Mark explains this to non-Jewish readers in verses 3-4. Look there with me. So, notice in these verses that he mentions this issue of washing hands specifically, but in verse 4 there are a host of other things they practice based on the traditions of the elders. It's important that we understand what these traditions are.

If you look at the OT the only people who are commanded to wash hands before eating are the priests in Exodus 30:18-21. This was hardly a biblical requirement for all the people. But, what would happen is that in the nation of Israel, the teachers of the law would try to apply the commands of the law to specific daily life. They would take a broad principle and try to give specific guidelines for how this principle should be applied. Over time this became the tradition of the elders and the Pharisees held this tradition as something required by God of the Jews. They are treating it as if to not follow the tradition is to not follow the Torah. Look at verse 5. They believe failure to follow this extrabiblical tradition means the disciples are unclean and therefore cannot properly worship God.

You see what has happened here and how this is a misunderstanding of holiness? They are multiplying commands to the point where they are holding extrabiblical commands up to the same level as God's Word. They are trying to keep people clean and maintain those distinctions so important to the nation of Israel. But they have created rules and regulations beyond what Scripture requires and by doing so have misunderstood holiness.

This is a subtle temptation for us. It's easy to think through a biblical principle and think, this is how people should apply it and then to treat your application of it as a requirement of others. Essentially what happens there is you go beyond what Scripture says and create extra commands for people to follow. The Pharisees said their goal was to create a fence around the law to keep people from even getting close to violating it. The problem is that you act as if your extra rules are God's rules.

People have the best of motives when they do this. They only want to help, but what ends up happening is instead of helping, it puts your logical reasoning on the same level as Scripture. And that doesn't lift your reasoning, it actually lowers Scripture to the authority of man-made regulations. It reduces the clarity and urgency of obeying the Bible because now the Bible has been muddied by all

these extra rules and regulations. Notice how Jesus responds to this and this brings us to our second miscalculation concerning holiness.

2. Maintaining Appearances (vs. 6-7)

Let's read verses 6-7. Jesus goes on the attack here and tells the Pharisees that they were doing the same things the leaders of Israel were doing in the OT. This is quoted from Isaiah 29:13-14. In Isaiah God is promising exile to Israel for just this sort of sinfulness and this foreshadows the deeper and further conflict between Jesus and the leaders of Israel that will ultimately lead to their downfall.

Look at verse 6 again. The leaders of Israel said all the right things and kept making sacrifices and keeping the festivals required by God. But, their hearts were given over to idols and sinfulness. They practiced injustice and oppressed the widows and sojourners. Jesus calls this hypocrisy. A hypocrite is one who has a discrepancy between his outer actions and his inner state of being and wanting. We all feel a separation from what we want to do and what we have to do at times, but the OT leaders of Israel and the Pharisees were cultivating and maintaining hypocrisy.

Sometimes we miss the point of this exhortation to the religious leaders in the OT. We think God was telling them to stop doing the sacrifices, but that's not the point. He was tired of their sacrifices because they were being done while the people were living unholy lives. They were maintaining the temple rituals while rejecting God throughout the week. Some Christians can read this and think that requiring people to come to church is an empty, legalistic ritual. They miss the point. God doesn't tell the nation to forego the OT law and throw the sacrifices and feasts out. He tells them that he hates that they do those things while their hearts are given to other lovers.

You do not tell the husband who is considering an affair to stop going home and eating dinner with his wife so he can avoid being a hypocrite. NO! You tell him to reject his other lover so that his heart can be enraptured with his bride again. God is telling Israel that he wants all of them, heart, soul, mind, and body.

There is a great danger for us in trying to maintain the appearance that everything is ok. There's a danger in cultivating a fissure between our outer actions and inner disposition. We want to avoid being hypocrites, but the answer is not to throw

away routines and rituals like church attendance, Bible reading, and sharing the gospel. One of the best ways to avoid the gap between inner desires and outer actions is to be open and honest with one another. Try to be as real and genuine with one another as possible. Speak the truth of God's Word to one another as well as the truth about your current state of desires.

So, we've seen that we must not go beyond God's Word and multiply commands and that doing this can lead to hypocrisy and the subtle danger of maintaining appearances. And this leads us to our third and final miscalculation regarding holiness.

3. Missing the Intent (vs. 8-13)

Here Jesus gets to the heart of the issue. When you multiply commands on top of God's Word and when you maintain appearances and cultivate hypocrisy, you end up missing the intent of God's Word and rejecting it altogether. Look at verses 8-9.

The bottom line is that when you misunderstand holiness and when you try to use your own reasoning and maintain appearances, you end up rejecting God's Word. This sounds pretty serious, right? They are putting their own extrabiblical traditions and standards above God's Word and so they end up rejecting God's Word. But I don't think they realized they were doing it to some extent. They were passionate about maintaining Jewish purity. They knew the OT very well. But they tinkered with the intent of God's Word and added rules on top of it to the point where they ended up functionally denying God's word.

Jesus gives a very clear example of how they would end up doing this. Look at verse 10. So, here are two biblical commands that are very clear. The first is found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 and both those passages are a listing of the 10 commandments. One of the most fundamental of biblical principles and commands is to treat those who gave you life in an honorable way. Verse 10 also gives the flipside of this command.

But rather than obeying God's Word, these extrabiblical traditions empowered by sinful desires lead the Pharisees to reject God's Word. Look at verses 11-12. The basic idea of Corban was that it was a vow to set something aside for God. So, in this case the biblical command demands that children honor and care for their

aging parents. But people would have property or money that they would make a vow with and promise it to God in their will. But in the mean time they could still use the property to make money, but the vow allowed them to keep the property or money from being used for their aging parents. Make sense?

But here's the thing about their reasoning...it sounds spiritual, doesn't it? I have devoted these resources to God for His glory, so I can't take care of my aging parents. But Jesus says here that the Pharisees are manipulating God's Word in order to feed their own desires and motivations. They equate holiness with something far different than what Jesus does.

Look at how Jesus summarizes this in verse 13. Jesus actually upholds the law here doesn't he? He points out how important obedience to God's Word is and tells us we should honor our parents, but the Pharisees have emphasized a good principle, remaining pure and clean, to an unhealthy level, and gone beyond Scripture. They have denied the big broad biblical principle of loving your neighbor by honoring and caring for your parents by engaging in some hyper-spiritual activity that denies the weightier matters of the law. They have missed the intent of God's Word. And notice again how Jesus ends verse 13, and many such things you do. This sort of handling of God's Word doesn't stay contained in one area. It multiplies.

We'll see the flip side of this next week as Jesus gives positive instruction regarding where sin really resides, but if you remember I told you in our summary statement that these 3 miscalculations of holiness lead to a rejection of Jesus. Ultimately the Pharisees didn't understand that the OT Scriptures were fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus. They didn't grasp the intent of the law because they had the one whom the whole OT was written about standing right in front of them and they missed it.

Really, the bottom line for the Pharisees is that they rejected the authority of Jesus as the Son of God. They did not believe him or his ministry. We have talked about this over and over again, but his ministry of advancing the kingdom brought wholeness physically and spiritually through his grace. The Pharisees were denying people that opportunity through their rejection of Jesus. They wanted people to abide by their traditions and they didn't recognize the true issue in defilement is the heart of men.

God tells Israel over and over again that what they needed was a new heart. Jesus came to give that new heart through His work. He came to not just cleanse hands, but to cleanse hearts. Our deepest needs are far greater than ritual cleansing and holiness. Our deepest need is to be freed from our sinful nature and put back into fellowship with a holy God. This is what the Pharisees rejected and what we must be careful not to miss. What's the lesson for our church body in this? Keep Jesus in the center. Keep his person and work the heartbeat of what we do. Let's not move away from how the OT points to our need for a new heart and his provision of one. And let's not miss the clear teaching of the NT that Jesus is the Son of God who brings the good news of the kingdom. Let's believe that news and keep that news central to our lives and church ministry.