

# Deeds above Creeds

## (Mark 7:1-23)

Which would you prefer for a next-door neighbor: a person of excellent habits or a person with a good heart? Which would you prefer for a good friend: a person of excellent habits, or a person with a good heart? Which would you prefer for a husband or a wife: a person of excellent habits, or a person with a good heart? Which would you prefer for a child: a child with excellent habits, or a child with a good heart?

It is wonderful to have a neighbor who conscientiously cares for his property while respecting your property. It is wonderful to have a friend who always treats you with consideration. It is wonderful to be married to a husband who always is thoughtful and courteous, or to a wife who always is gracious in her comments and deeds. It is wonderful to have a son or daughter who shows respect and uses good manners.

As wonderful as those situations are, none of them compare to having a neighbor, a friend, a husband, a wife, a son, or a daughter with a good heart.

When you discuss good behavior, you are discussing the quality of a person's self-control. When you discuss a good heart, you are discussing the quality of the person.

This is the focus of today's Scripture. Pharisees and scribes have come down from Jerusalem and, interestingly, they are gathered around Jesus watching the disciples. The disciples, it seems, are eating lunch. They have come in from the day's work and immediately sit down to eat without observing the ceremonial rite of hand washing.

The Pharisees cease upon this ceremonial oversight and question Jesus at verse 5: "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" This is all that Jesus needs to hear. He sticks up for his disciples, turns on these religious leaders and says in essence, "Why don't you live according to the traditions of God and clean your hearts?"

What mistake did these Pharisees make? What is Jesus trying to convey, not only to them, but to us as well? For you see, it is just as easy for us to fall into a good habit and leave behind a good heart. What is Jesus' warning to us?

I

**Jesus is warning us not to place human creeds above God inspired deeds.** I like the story about Queen Victoria who was at a diplomatic reception in London. The guest of honor was an African chieftain. All went well during the meal, until, at the end, finger bowls were served. The guest of honor had never seen a British finger bowl, and no one had thought to brief him before hand about its purpose. So he took the finger bowl in his two hands, lifted it to his mouth, and drank its contents--down to the very last drop!

For an instant there was breathless silence among the British upper crust and then they began to whisper to one another. All that stopped in the next instant as the Queen silently took her finger bowl in her two hands, lifted it, and drank its contents! A moment later 500 surprised British ladies and gentlemen simultaneously drank the contents of their own fingerbowls.<sup>1</sup>

It was "against the rules" to drink from a fingerbowl, but on that particular evening Victoria changed the rules---because she was, after all, the Queen. It is "against the rules" not to wash your hands before you eat and on that the Pharisees called the disciples who follow Jesus. But Jesus recognizes their hypocrisy and he quotes from Isaiah, "These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me."

Our tradition should not kill our compassion. When people are in need and love is called upon we should not allow human conventions to eclipse that prompting of the heart to treat others as Christ would treat them. God prefers deeds to our man made creeds, love over law, and hearts over habits. But we should be careful here. Jesus is not saying do away with creeds. Listen to how Jesus admonishes the rulers, he says, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions." One of the greatest creeds is to honor your father and your mother. We should not set aside the greater commandment for the lesser one, especially when the lesser one is one we've created.

Our first priority is our devotion to God but did you know that that devotion can sometimes hinder our Christian discipleship. That's precisely what happened here. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law made a rule. The rule was called Corban. It held

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<sup>1</sup>This illustration is from an internet service called "esermos/sermonillustrations.com

that when a gift was devoted to God, it couldn't be rescinded. Let's say you pledge a certain amount of money next year to the church, 10,000 dollars. (A priest can dream can't he?) That money is Corban. It has been devoted to God. That's a good thing. But then tragedy strikes and your parents need financial help. As your priest I expect you to reduce your gift to the church and give it to your parents. Which is greater, Moses' Commandment to honor your parents or your pledge to help the church?

The Pharisees got into trouble because they used their Corban rule to lock people into gifts they could not keep when trouble came. That's not love that's human law that dismisses God's law. That's not living from the heart that's living under the constraints of a habit. If your creed is standing in the way of your doing a good deed that reflects the law of God then examine the creed. It might be killing your compassion. That's Jesus' first warning.

II

**Secondly, Jesus is warning us not to look at the outside habits but rather the inside motives.** It is interesting that the Pharisees chose to send a delegation all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee, a 60-mile journey. The delegation is not there for a spot of tea. They have come to observe for a while. How long we do not know but you can bet that their presence was not welcomed. And why is this? Because, as was so often the case, they were not on a fact-finding mission but a fault-finding mission.

Looking for any reason to hang Jesus they cease upon a minor infraction. The disciples are faulted for not performing the religious ritual of hand washing before they ate. This said the Pharisees was an "unclean" act. Now what's going on here? What does "unclean" mean? The obvious explanation, as you might have guessed, is dirty hands. But the practice of washing was not done for reasons of health; in that day, it was done for religious purity. It was thought that the normal activities and circumstances of every day living made a Jew unclean before God. Pouring water over the hands washed away this defilement.

It's an interesting question: Can outside rituals make us inside saints?

It's like the young man who came to a great rabbi and said, "Teacher, I want to made a rabbi." It was wintertime then. The rabbi stood at the window with his back to the young man, looking out upon the courtyard. The young man was droning into his ears

a glowing account of his piety and learning.

The young man said, "You see, Rabbi, I always go dressed in spotless white like the sages of old. I never drink any alcoholic beverages; only water ever passes my lips. Also, I live a plain and simple life. I have sharp-edged nails inside my shoes to mortify me. Even in the coldest weather, I lie naked in the snow to torment my flesh. Also daily, I receive forty lashes on my bare back to complete each days penance."

As the young man spoke, a white horse was led into the yard and to the water trough. It drank, and then it rolled in the snow, as horses sometimes do.

"Just look!" cried the rabbi. "That animal, too, is dressed in white. It also drinks nothing but water, has nails in its shoes and rolls naked in the snow. Also, rest assured, it gets its daily ration of forty lashes on the rump from its master. Now, I ask you, is it a saint, or is it a horse?"

Do clean hands make for a clean heart? To answer this Jesus called the crowd to his side and with the Pharisees and Teachers looking on he said, "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'"

Dirty hands do not make a dirty heart. From within, Jesus said, not from without. It is greed not grime, malice not money, deceit not dust, arrogance not alcohol that makes us unclean. Water will not wash away sexual immorality. Religious rituals will not cleanse us from envy, slander, and arrogance. All these evils, Jesus said, come from inside and make a man "unclean."

### III

There is one more point here and it is buried within the story. You have to think, slowly, through the story to get at it. Jesus is letting us know that God requires good Hearts above good Deeds but he is also saying-God requires God inspired Creeds. For when we think like Jesus we will more fully live like him.

On first reading it sounds as though Jesus is condemning ritualistic religion. But he is not. Rituals are good things. If pouring water over our hands to remove dirt reminds us that we need daily, to wash our hearts, and practice generosity, kindness,

faithfulness, humility, and fidelity to our spouses then that is a good thing. If, on the other hand, we think the simple act of pouring water over our hands makes us acceptable before God then that is a bad thing.

Traditions are good things. Every church has them. But our traditions should never stand in the way of God's command to love our neighbor and honor our parents. The Pharisees demanded that a gift devoted to God was more important than anything else. Family members may be suffering but don't break your promise to God. That kind of strict adherence to tradition is a religion with no heart.

Let me also say a word on behalf of creeds. Creeds are good things. They are necessary. Every Sunday we say the Apostle's or Nicene Creed. The Church has been saying these creeds for almost 1900 years. It's one of our rituals, one of our traditions. Does saying it make you holy? No. Does memorizing it make you a saint? No. But if from your heart, you earnestly believe all that the creed teaches, then it will help to shape both your heart and influence your deeds.

You see, don't you? You can have all your "i's" dotted and all your "t's" crossed. You can perform all the right rituals and recite word for word the creeds but they won't make you clean before God. Religion, if it is good religion, is from the heart.

Picture a child playing the piano. "The child holds her hands just as she's been told...she has memorized the piece perfectly. She has hit all the proper notes with deadly accuracy. But her heart's not in it, only her fingers. What she's playing is a sort of music, but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping."

You see the Pharisees and scribes were like the girl playing the piano. They were doing the right things but their heart wasn't in it and imposed upon others standards that were not set by God.

When it comes to faith and life, let me ask you a question: Are your hearts in it or only your fingers? Are you allowing God's renewing grace to work in you from deep within? For as Jesus teaches us God desires deeds before creeds, love above law, and hearts over habits.