

## Sermon 2 September 2018

**James 1:19-27 Mark 7:1-8**

This gospel passage really does highlight the difference between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees. It highlights an accusation frequently levelled at the Pharisees by Jesus; that they are too preoccupied with their rules and regulations to the exclusion of what is really important, the expressing of God's love to all and sundry.

In this case, the Pharisees are criticizing some of the disciples for not following the prescribed ritual of hand-washing before eating food. So what was involved in this ritual?

The first point to make is that rule was not made in the interests of hygienic purity; it was ceremonial cleanliness that was at stake. Before every meal and between each course, the hands had to be washed in a certain way.

First, the hands were held with fingertips pointing upwards. Water was poured over them and had to run at least down to the wrist; the minimum amount of water was one quarter of a log, which is equal to one and a half eggshells of water. While the hands were still wet, each hand had to be cleansed with the fist of the other – the fist of one hand was rubbed into the palm of the other. This meant that the hands at this stage were wet, but that water was now unclean because it had touched unclean hands. So next, the hands had to be held with fingertips pointing downwards and water had to be poured over them in such a way that it began at the wrists and ran off at the fingertips. After all this had been done, the hands were considered to be clean.

Anyone failing to adhere to these regulations was considered to be unclean in the sight of God. Before we look at Jesus's response to the application of these regulations, I want to give a little background. Mark refers to the Pharisees and the teachers of religious law.

These teachers of religious law were actually a class of legal experts known as Scribes, a group who came into being about 500 years before Christ. These Scribes took the moral principles by which all Jews were expected to live by and broke them down into thousands and thousands of little rules and regulations governing every possible action and situation in life. By the time they had finished, it took about fifty volumes to contain them all. To say they were obsessed with detail would be a gross understatement.

The Pharisees were the religious leaders and it was their job to see that these rules and regulations were strictly adhered to. And as the regulations covered every aspect of Jewish life, they became very prominent and influential people, and they knew it and they relished it. They became carried away with their importance and demanded that people recognise their importance. Their religion became one of ostentation. And this is why Jesus became so very angry with them.

Jesus became angry with them because through these rules and regulations they lost sight of what the law of God was all about – to love God and love one another. And angry because in the implementation of these laws the Pharisees made themselves the focal point of religion instead of God and his message.

Jesus called the Pharisees 'hypocrites'. The Greek word *hupokrites* has an interesting background. It originally meant *someone who answers*, progressed to mean *someone who answers in a set dialogue*, in other words, an actor. And so finally it came to mean someone whose life is something of an act, that is, they say one thing but do something quite different.

So what is the message for us here? Quite simply, that we can attend church, read the Bible etc but if our lives don't reflect what God wants us to be, then it is rather meaningless. Let me

tell you a story. It is a parable.

Two cars were waiting at a red light. The light turned green, but the man didn't notice it. A woman in the car behind him is watching traffic pass around them. The woman begins pounding on her steering wheel and yelling at the man to move. The man doesn't move. The woman is going ballistic inside her car, ranting and raving at the man, pounding the dashboard with her fists.

The light turns orange and the woman begins to blow the car horn and screams profanity and curses at the man. The man looks up, sees the orange light and accelerates through the intersection just as the light turns red. The woman is beside herself, screaming in frustration as she misses her chance to get through the intersection.

As she is still in mid-rant, there is a tap on the window and she looks up to see a cop standing there. The cop tells her to get out of the car and keep her hands out in front of her. She complies, speechless at what is happening. The cop orders her to place her hands on the roof of the car and then he snaps handcuffs on her and hustles her into the patrol car. She is too bewildered to ask any questions and is driven to the station where she is fingerprinted, photographed, booked and placed in a cell.

After a couple of hours, she is fetched from the call and escorted to the booking desk where the original officer is waiting with her personal effects. He hands her the bag containing her things and says, 'I'm sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn and abusing the driver in front of you. Then I noticed your bumper sticker which read, 'Jesus loves you,' the sticker on your back windscreen which read, 'Follow me to Sunday School,' and also the Christian fish emblem on the trunk of your car. So naturally, I thought the car couldn't belong to you and that you must have stolen it!'

We are all very human every one of us, but we do need to ensure that, as much as possible, the way we conduct ourselves, reflects what we stand for. It's what we do, not what we say, that determines whether we are good Christians or not.

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