



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Heart Problems (Mark 7:14-23)

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Have you ever wondered why people do the things they do—especially those who have nothing to gain and everything to lose? You hear about a rich and famous actress who is caught shoplifting, or a legislator or congressman who is found cheating on his wife. (I remember the day when my good friend's sister called me to tell me my friend had been arrested. I went to visit him in jail and as he explained what happened, I thought “why—you threw away everything—for what?”) Or maybe you don't need to look anywhere else but a mirror and you ask yourself, “Why in the world did I do that?”

In Mark 7, Jesus gives the answer. This passage is actually the second part of a two-part reply that Jesus gave to the accusatory question of the Pharisees “Why do your disciples eat food without washing their hands?”

In the first part of the answer, Jesus did not answer their question but rather exposed their own hypocrisy as they eagerly strove to live by the “traditions of the elders.” Jesus showed them that by obeying these man-made rules, they are actually seen to be hypocrites because their lips speak praises to God, but their hearts are far from Him (7:6), they ignore the actual law of God to obey their rules (7:8-9), and they keep others from being obedient to the law (7:10-13).

In the second part, Jesus exposed the fallacy of their philosophy and “religious actions.” He showed that they had it mixed up. It is not something outside going in that defiles (as they believed—7:3-5) but rather what is inside going out that defiles.

Mark 7:14-23 *After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, “Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. ¹⁶If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” ¹⁷When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. ¹⁸And He said to them, “Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (Thus He declared all foods clean.) ²⁰And He was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. ²¹For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, ²²deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and*

foolishness. ²³All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”

Jesus' dialogue began by addressing the question that the Pharisees delivered (7:5). After exposing their hypocrisy, Jesus then turned to crowd for further discussion (7:14). When He is finished with the crowd, He gave a fuller explanation to His confused disciples who asked about the parable (7:17). One must keep in mind that these men were brought up under the Pharisaic teachings concerning the traditions. These things that Jesus taught were new and quite revolutionary in their mindset.

A doctor must have the right diagnosis to be able to give the right medical procedures. One does not want to take chemotherapy for cancer if his or her ankle is broken. The Pharisees diagnosed the problem with people (including themselves) incorrectly. Jesus, who knows the hearts of men, knows exactly what the problem is and therefore, knows how to correct it.

In this study, we will walk through this passage by asking four questions. In understanding the answers, we will see Jesus' diagnosis of our heart condition, and how it impacts every aspect of our lives. And then, in turn may we submit to His diagnosis and desire a new heart.

QUESTION #1 -- WHAT IS THE “HEART”?

Four times in this passage, Jesus refers to that which is inside coming out (7:15, 20, 21, 23). Three times (including verse 6), Jesus uses the word “heart” (*kardia* in the Greek). Whereas *kardia* could be a reference to one's organ which pumps blood throughout the body, it could also be used to describe the place where one thinks, feels, knows, decides, judges between right and wrong, and holds convictions. This second option is what fits best within the context.

Many have seen a movie like *Apollo 13* where a mission control center monitors, decides, and questions everything. This is a good way to describe the heart—it is a person's “mission control center”. This would be the understanding of the Hebrew and Greek cultures of Jesus' day.

In the 21st-century American culture, when one speaks of the heart, he or she is usually referring to their emotions. That is where we get the saying about emotionally based people, “They think with their heart, not their head.” But when Jesus spoke about the heart, he is talking about the whole inner being of a person and so “thinking with one's heart” is quite appropriate in the first century.

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In his commentary on Job, Robert Alden wrote, “The heart is not only one of the seats of emotion in Hebrew psychology; but it is also one of the locations of thinking, reasoning or planning.”¹ Thus Solomon stated: *The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, But the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things* (Proverbs 15:28). When answering a question, the righteous man will stop, think, and plan before speaking. The wicked just spouts off whatever is on his tongue without any thought with his heart.

This is quite telling when King David wrote: *The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good* (Psalm 14:1). The fool has contemplated, thought about and concluded that there is no God. The picture is that the evidence is laid out before the man, and all the evidence points to the truth that there is obviously God. Then the man thinks and meditates, and his mission control center judges and decides that there is no God. Thus, he draws the judgment that he is a fool; his heart ignores that which is clear and evident.

It is also revealing the nature of the Pharisees when Jesus quoted Isaiah: *This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me* (Mark 7:6). The outside (the lips) appears to honor God, but the inside, their “mission control center”, is far from Him.

QUESTION #2 -- WHY WERE THE TRADITIONS POWERLESS TO HELP?

In Mark 7:15, Jesus proclaimed the premise to the crowd--*there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man*. He then explains the truth to His perplexed disciples in 7:18-19--*whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated*.²

He is still following up with the Pharisees question about eating with defiled hands. They believed that the defiled, unwashed hands defiled the food; which eaten would defile the person. Jesus simply stated what goes in, goes through and goes out (7:19 literally states “goes into the latrine”).

It cannot defile a person, though, for it never enters the heart. It does not enter and therefore, does not affect the “mission control center” of the man. The “defiled” food never enters the thought, emotion, and will of a person.

In the broader context, Jesus is saying that breaking of the “traditions of the elders” does not defile a person, for it does nothing to the heart. And the flip side is also true—obeying the “traditions of the elders” does not purify a person either, because it cannot do anything to the heart.

This becomes visible clear with Jesus’ accusation concerning the praise from the lips and the distance of the heart. The Pharisees kept the traditions to the utmost, but the obedience did not affect the center of their attitudes, emotions and thinking. On a later occasion Jesus stated to these leaders: *You are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness* (Matthew 23:27). The keeping of the traditions could do no more to one’s heart than fine paint can do to the inside of a man’s tomb.

QUESTION #3 -- WHAT TRULY DEFILES A PERSON?

So if these things do not defile a person, what does? Jesus’ answer is quite startling. He said that which defiles is “the mission control center” of a person. In other words, the defilement is already in someone for it is their heart; and the heart produces the evil that comes out of a person. It is not goes in, but what comes out—that which comes out of the heart.

JEREMIAH 17:9 THE HEART IS MORE DECEITFUL THAN ALL ELSE AND IS DESPERATELY SICK; WHO CAN UNDERSTAND IT?

Why is this truth startling? Those listening had been taught all their life that they needed to stay away from this thing or that thing or it will defile them before God. If they touched this or that, or broke this rule or that tradition, then they needed to perform this other ritual to be clean again. Jesus comes along and says, “Too late. All of you are already defiled because it is not the things on the outside that make you dirty, it is your own dirty heart that has defiled you.” All of a sudden, their fastidious keeping of the traditions is shown to be absolutely useless in making them right and keeping them clean.

Instead of things outside touching the inside defiling someone, Jesus listed the actions and attitudes that come from within and are manifested outwardly which defile.

DEFILING ACTIONS

- evil thoughts -- more than just bad thinking, but ideas and thoughts for evil purposes; many times leading to the other actions listed.

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- fornications -- reference to any type of sexual activity outside of God's design for marriage
- thefts, murders, adulteries -- all actions prohibited by the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17).
- deeds of coveting and wickedness -- also prohibited by the Ten Commandments covering those actions one performs because they want what they do not have.

DEFILING ATTITUDES

- deceit -- the attitude behind the actions of lying, manipulation and pretense
- sensuality -- literally understood as unrestrained, shameless behavior.
- envy -- not just jealousy over someone having something that another wants, but also a lack of generosity toward others.
- slander -- the desire and action to defame another for one's own promotion.
- pride -- the arrogance of a person which usually drives them to commit many of the defiling acts listed above. Pride either blinds one to consequences or elevates one to think the consequences will not catch up to him or her.
- foolishness -- a wrong attitude toward God (Psalm 14:1) which leads to sinful behavior toward him.

Why do people do the irrational, sinful things that they do? It is because it is their nature. Millard Erikson wrote, "We are not simply sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners." These things are in the heart of each person. It is only by the grace of God that every person (including each of us) is not performing every act all the time to its highest degree.

People are not defiled by outside things; therefore, outside things (keeping laws, rituals, traditions) cannot cleanse them. One is defiled by his or her own heart's actions and attitudes; therefore, a heart transplant is what is needed to cleanse and make whole.

QUESTION #4 -- WHY IS ALL THIS INFORMATION NECESSARY?

Several practical applications for living can easily be made from a proper understanding of what defiles a person (and each of these points could be fleshed out more fully). First of all, it is necessary for oneself. Proverbs 28:26 states, *He who trusts in his own heart (mission-control center) is a fool, But he who walks wisely will be delivered.* The wise person does not depend on his own understanding, but trusts God (Proverbs 3:5); especially when one realizes the extreme deceitfulness of his or her own heart (Jeremiah 17:9).

Secondly, it is necessary for proper parenting. Solomon stated, *Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of discipline will remove it far from him*

(Proverbs 22:15). Parents need to realize their sweet, cute bundle of joy has a depraved heart filled with all kinds of evil waiting to come out. This may sound harsh, but it is how the Bible describes us. Therefore, parents are to discipline their children and teach them the way they should go (of course, the parents need to know the way in order to show their children).

Thirdly, this teaching from Jesus is necessary for understanding societal problems. Modern pop psychology believes that people are born good or neutral and their environment is what corrupts and leads astray. Therefore, it is believed that if we can just educate and protect our children from bad influences they will grow up with a healthy self-esteem and act right (they will "just say no").

But since their diagnosis is wrong, so is their remedy. Education and isolation from the bad will not keep a person from "going bad". The "bad" is already in their hearts; therefore, neither education nor any other type of moralism will change a heart and keep people from doing wrong.

Next, it is necessary for proper evangelism. Proper evangelism seeks conversion not reformation. Believers do not seek to reform or improve a person when they explain the gospel to others; they seek to see a complete conversion. This conversion is manifested in the changing of one's mind (which is reflected in his or her behavior) concerning the rule of their life and salvation of their soul. Conversion, similar to repentance (Jeremiah 3:22-4:2), is the turning from sin to God (Acts 3:19; 14:15, 2 Corinthians 3:15-16). Repentance is the act; conversion is the result. God is not interested in fixing people, but making them brand new.

Therefore, this teaching of Jesus reveals the necessity of having a new heart. This is reflected throughout the Scriptures.

Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God...

Psalm 51:17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

Ezekiel 36:25-27 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. (cf. Ezek 11:19-20)

This leads to the truth that a new heart is a work of God in a person's life. A person would be more successful doing open heart surgery on himself than anyone trying to make his defiled heart clean and good.

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2 Corinthians 5:17 *Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.*

Galatians 6:13-15 *For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh. But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.*

Colossians 3:8-10 *But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him... (cf. Gal 6:13-15)*

Finally, with all the above issues in mind, a need for a new heart shows the necessity of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. The Apostle Paul wrote, *And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross* (Colossians 2:13-14).

The sins that came from people's defiled hearts, which defiled them, had to be addressed. A just God could not allow this unfulfilled "certificate of debt" to go unpaid and ignored. Therefore, by His grace, He sent His Son, to be the payment which forgave His children of their sins.

Nothing less could redeem people and make them new. Yes, it is a horrific price; but our hearts are horrific in its sin and rebellion toward God.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion is quite simple and short. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, trusting His work on the cross to cleanse you, give all praise to God for giving you a new heart. Now, you can live a life pleasing to Him; which in the past you could not. If you are not a follower of Jesus Christ, then hear this: God can forgive your sins; God can give you a new heart--are you interested?

¹ Robert Alden, *Job* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 54.

²Mark interjects the parenthetical thought in verse 19: Thus He declared all foods clean. This parallels with the later revelation to Peter, through a vision, that God has declared all food to be clean (Acts 10:9-15).