

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(August 14, 2011)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

Red Tape

(Mark 7:1-23)¹

Study #13

Introduction: A set of helpful guidelines...

Obedience to God's commands is a challenge, no doubt about it. We struggle with understanding some of His commands and then struggle with obeying what we do know because He raises the bar pretty high.

So, have you ever wished that somebody would come along and devise a set of guidelines that would make obedience a little easier, the path to pleasing God a little clearer?

Well, your long wait for help is now over. It's Pastor Dave to the rescue!

I've become concerned about the level of your obedience lately. So, I've devised a set of supplemental rules and policies that I believe will greatly assist you in your efforts to obey.

First, to promote spiritual vitality, I propose that we simply establish a set number of minutes of prayer per day, verses from the Bible to read per day, and number of fasting days per year. (Of course, standards for each discipline will be increased as you grow as a Christian.) I'm still working on what the specific numbers will be, but I'll get them to you soon.

¹ 7:1-23 is the longest conflict section in Mark and its length is a clue to its importance.

Second, to promote generosity (and I know that you all want to be generous), I propose that the church be given access to your bank accounts, 401(k) accounts, IRAs, and other investments. Then, the Elders can let you know what your giving should be, based on your income, indebtedness and net wealth.

Third, to promote "gracious speech", I propose that members of Northwest undergo a minor surgical procedure to implant a very small (unobtrusive, really) voice recorder that will transmit (3G) everything that you say to the church office, monitoring your speech patterns. If your speech deviates outside of the norms of "gracious speech" you'll receive a call from one of the Elders.

I'm still working on other areas - sobriety, family values, sexual purity and others - but I'm hopeful that getting these things in place will smooth the way for clarity and will help us all obey better.

What's that? You're not excited about these guidelines? You see problems with this list of rules to supplement Scriptures' wisdom?

Good. You're in good company. One day, Jesus ran into some folks who had put together just such a list. The run-in wasn't pretty...

What we have before us today is another stand-off between Jesus and the religious rulers of Israel. These guys have already opposed Him on Sabbath policies. Today, the theme is moral purity and the path that DOES NOT lead there.²

As we start off today, I wrestle with nomenclature. If there are *herds* of cows and *packs* of dogs and *prides* of lions, what do you call a group of Pharisees and scribes? Not finding an appropriate collective, I made up my own.

At Mark 7:1, Jesus finds Himself surrounded by a *shackle* of religionists.

² It is difficult to say where this incident falls, chronologically. Mark is concerned to show the general increasing animosity toward Jesus from the scribes and Pharisees as time went on, and to explain Jesus' departure from Galilee to Gentile regions, which is recorded immediately after this incident.

Showdown! Jesus and the Religious Rulers (vv. 1-13)

A Delegation from Jerusalem (vv. 1-5)

A pharisaic observation (vv. 1-2)

A “shackle” of religionists (v. 1)

[1] The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem

We have seen this group - or a group like this one - before. Long before this Jesus had attracted more than local attention and had been visited by the religious elite to check Him out.

And it is saying something that in a day without television, radio, cell phones or the Internet, word traveled ninety miles south to Jerusalem about Jesus.

The group gathered around Jesus, but it wasn't to reflect on what He had to say or to listen intently to His teaching. It was more of a “surrounding” going on here.

They have already proven to be in opposition to Jesus (the earlier delegation had accused Jesus of being in league with the devil - 3:22). Like that group, this group has observed something that has them greatly troubled.

Eating with impure hands (v. 2)

[2]...and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed.³

Today, with our knowledge of micro-organisms and germs, we might read this and instinctively jump to the conclusion that the disciples had dirt on their hands and that the main issue here is hygiene. The main issue is NOT hygiene.

³ Mark is writing to inform Gentile readers of the Pharisees' practices, as they would have been well-known to the Jews.

Mark will explain why the unwashed hands of the disciples was so troublesome to the Pharisees and it had nothing to do with a fear of transmitting germs and illness.⁴

Pharisaic practice (vv. 3-4)

[3] (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; [4] and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.)

Washing hands and utensils

The Old Testament (especially the book of Leviticus) addressed matters of ceremonial, or ritual, purity. Priests, in particular, were required to wash their hands and feet before entering the Tabernacle.⁵ And, frankly, there were not many other commands about ceremonial washings and ritual purification rites in the Old Testament.

But, by the time of Jesus, such washing had come to be increasingly important, not just for the priests, but for all Jews.

Every Jew was expected to wash his or her hands before a meal. And the washing was to be done in a particular way, according to certain formula.⁶

Kitchen utensils including bowls and cups, pitchers and copper pots were to be washed. In some ancient manuscripts of this passage there is even included the word “bed” or “couch.”⁷

⁴ Each Rabbi would put in place his own expectations of his disciples with regard to hand-washing. Jesus evidently required nothing beyond hygienic hand-washing, which would have been deemed necessary because so much food was eaten out of a common bowl.

⁵ Exodus 30:19; 40:13 - priests had to wash hands and feet before entering the Tabernacle.

⁶ Literally, they wash “with the fist.” Even among Jews there was disagreement concerning how and how often to wash hands. Lane has an extended treatment of the kinds of hand-washings practiced by the Jews in the first century.

Mark says that they washed upon returning from the market, too. And the way he frames his comment here gives us a peak at the real point behind the washings.

This after-a-trip-to-the-market washing was a “baptism”⁸, and involved immersing the whole body in water.

And the reason for the immersion was that those who had been to the market had possibly been exposed to possible sources of moral impurity - people such as sinners and tax-collectors.

I can dredge up a “for instance” from my own life that will illustrate what was going on here. When I was in my first years of school, if one of us boys was touched by a girl, we would have to go through a rather rigorous procedure to get rid of “cooties.”

“Cooties shots” were generally punches, followed by a rhyme, *“Circle, circle / dot, dot / now you’ve got the cootie shot”* or *“Circle, circle / square, square / now you have it everywhere”* or *“Circle, circle / knife, knife / now you’ve got it all your life”*.

I’m really not trying to make fun of the Pharisees (well, maybe a little bit). But it does seem to me that the function of their washings was similar to my childhood cooties shots. The external washings were intended to do something internally.

The washings - both hand-washing and immersion - were not for the same purpose as our bathing today. The Jews of Jesus’ day did not wash so much to get dirt off of them as to remove moral stain from within them, which was there because of their involvement with a sinful, morally polluted world.

But if the Old Testament didn’t call all Jews to such washings, where did this emphasis about washing come from?

Well, they were “the traditions of the elders.”

⁷ It may be that a person copying this passage wanted to emphasize how thorough and comprehensive were the Jews’ attempts at purification.

⁸ The Greek word is “baptize” - βαπτίζω.

“The traditions of the Elders”

As the national life of Israel developed through the centuries,⁹ rules and regulations and “laws” other than the Laws God sprouted up to “protect” the Law of God.

This set of rules and laws was codified in a separate set of books called the Mishnah.

The Mishnah was the “fence around the Torah” that protected the Torah.¹⁰ Mishnah elaborated on every conceivable implication of the Torah.

Torah was policy. There was never any question about that. Torah was what God said. But it wasn’t always clear how Torah was to be applied. And THAT was what Mishnah was all about. Mishnah prescribed in infinite detail how the intent of the Torah ought to be fulfilled.

And by Jesus’ day, obedience to the Mishnah was as binding as obedience to Torah.¹¹

Torah (God’s Law) said nothing about people ceremonially washing their hands prior to a meal, but Mishnah did.

And the Pharisees noted with disapproval the unwashed hands of some of Jesus’ disciples at meal time - and they told Him about it.

A pharisaic question (v. 5)

[5] The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?”

⁹ And especially as Judaism’s encounter with Gentile culture increased in the post-exilic era, ritual cleanliness became more and more important as a way of maintaining Jewish distinctiveness.

¹⁰ The Torah consists of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis - Deuteronomy.

¹¹ Some rabbis taught that Moses received two laws on Mount Sinai. The written Torah and the oral Mishnah. The Sadducees believed that only the Law was authoritative. Pharisees accepted the long evolving oral law as equally authoritative.

The disciples have violated Mishnah. They have disregarded special rules put in place to remind people of God's holiness and to call attention to the need for purity. For that, these disciples of Jesus are slapped on the wrist.

But Jesus didn't see it the way they did and He took exception to their criticism of His followers.

Jesus Fires Back (vv. 6-13)

Traditions vs. Commandment (vv. 6-8)

Hypocrisy (v. 6)

[6] And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites...

The word "hypocrite" was taken from the world of the theater. It referred to someone who was playing a part on a stage. The hypocrite pretends to be something he or she is not.

On stage, there is nothing wrong with pretending. But the Pharisees weren't on stage. They were pretending to be all about God by their washings and purification rites - and they were not all about God.

This is the only time Mark used the word "hypocrite." And he means by its use that we understand that the religionists were only giving "lip service" to God.

Heart-felt obedience to God vs. lip service (vv. 6-7)

[6] And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. [7] 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.'¹²

¹² Isaiah 29:13 - the wording is slightly altered but in such a way that the meaning is not changed. This is a near quote from the Septuagint (LXX - the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament).

In terms of outward appearance, the Pharisees were doing great! They looked like they were the most godly people around. But it was a lie because their lives were nothing more than conformity to a code. Their commitment to God was only skin deep. Their practice was not sourced in a heart that loved and trusted God.

To the Jewish way of thinking, the heart was the essential personality. In both the Hebrew and the Greek world, the heart was considered the seat of the will and the intellect - not so much the emotions. The heart is who and what you REALLY are.

And here is one of the biggest differences between Jesus and religionists: First century Pharisees - and their 21st century descendants - are all about appearances and externals while Jesus always places priority on the internal over the external.

Because the Pharisees were concerned with appearances, they were drawn to obey rules made by people they could see rather than commands made by the invisible God.

Neglecting THE THING most critical (v. 8)

[8] "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men."

And here is the problem. It is impossible to give equal weight to the commandment of God and the tradition of men. One will hold sway. And once we start adding to God's commands - no matter how well-intentioned - there is a tendency for the commandments of God to get ignored.

It can happen in any life, in any organization, in any church. It can happen that traditions might get in the way of the true worship and service of God at our own church. For instance...

- **CHRISTMAS**

We believe that Jesus was born of a virgin and that while He walked the earth was the incarnate Son of God. We affirm that all the time. Then December 25th rolls around and we put a lot of emphasis on Christmas, with carols and skits and special messages and decorations.

It's possible that traditions designed to help us remember the miracle of the Incarnation could conceivably bury the very truth we are celebrating.

- EASTER

We believe that Jesus rose from the dead, resurrected by the power of God on the third day after He was crucified for our sins. We believe that all year long, but when we come to the Easter season we have special services and children's choirs and more. It's conceivable that we might so wrapped up in the extra busy-ness of the season that we neglect the life-changing reality that Jesus is alive.

- THE LORD'S SUPPER

We traditionally take the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of every month to remember Jesus' death and resurrection and the New Covenant relationship we now enjoy with God through faith in Christ. Is it a stretch to think that the constant repetition of this *tradition* might deaden us to the reality of the Gospel truths we believe?

If these are a few of the ways we might be guilty of lip service, Jesus has His own "exhibit A" from the experience of the Pharisees. He first pauses to pay them a compliment.

It's nice to be an expert at something. You may be an expert business manager, homemaker, educator, or athlete. Jesus says that that the Pharisees and scribes had their own area of expertise.

Exhibit A: Honor your mother and father... (vv. 9-13)

At His sarcastic best (v. 9)

[9] He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition."

Specifically, they have laid aside the fifth of the Ten Commandments, the command to honor father and mother.

The fifth commandment (v. 10)

[10] "For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH'

The command to honor parents was a serious command. Moses received that command on Mount Sinai and it is recorded at Exodus 20. Then, in the very next chapter God says that even speaking disrespectfully of a parent is a capital offense!

But there was always more to "honoring" parents than just treating them with respect. To honor father and mother meant that the grown child would take care of mom and dad, would see to it that mom and dad didn't starve to death in their old age when they were too old to work.

"Honoring" had to do with financial, material support!

Yet through "the traditions of the elders" there was a way to relieve a child of the responsibility of "honoring" his elderly, destitute parents.

"Corban"

[11] but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban'¹³ (that is to say, given to God),' [12] you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; [13] thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down..."

According to the command of God, a child's resources were to be placed at the disposal of his or her parents to help in their old age.

But an adult child could devote a portion of his wealth to God ("Corban"), thus taking it out of circulation, and making it no longer useful to his parents.

¹³ Corban = something offered, dedicated to God.

If a son declared his property Corban to his parents, he neither promised it to the Temple nor prohibited its use to himself. But he did legally exclude his parents from the right of benefit.¹⁴

This tradition rendered the command of God superfluous and elevated gift-giving to the Temple over taking care of elderly parents.

Jesus said that this is only one example among many He could have provided.

Etc, etc, etc... (v. 13b)

[13b]...and you do many things such as that."

Jesus is not specific here. But we could think of a couple of things to jump start our own Pharisaic-tradition-over-command-of-God list.

First, you'll remember that these religious types made so many rules about Sabbath observance that the Sabbath had ceased to be a day of rest and restoration and had become a heavy burden.

Then, remembering the theme at the beginning of the chapter about cleanliness, it is clear that they made so many rules about defilement that it became nearly impossible to meaningfully serve people who didn't lead neat, clean, tidy lives.

In fact, Jesus Himself violated their rules about defilement by hanging with lepers (1:40) and tax collectors (2:13) and Gentiles (5:1) and menstruating women (5:25) and corpses (5:35)!

If He had obeyed their man-made rules He would not have been free to obey the God-made rules about love and justice and mercy.

OK, to this point we have been eavesdropping in on a conversation between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus opens it up to the crowds that were on the sidelines, perhaps also eavesdropping.

Listen! Jesus and the Crowd (vv. 14-16)

[14] After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: [15] 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. [16] ["If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."]¹⁵

This is Jesus on purification: We are not defiled by what we eat, even if our hands are unclean.

Now some in the crowd would have been puzzled by this because it was so radically different from what they had been hearing all their lives.

All they had ever heard was that eating without ritually washing made them unclean. Now Jesus says, "*Nope. Not true. Defilement comes about in an entirely different manner. Moral defilement comes from inside. It is what comes out that defiles.*"

And with that, He turned from the crowd, leaving them (most likely) scratching their heads.

Then, He and the twelve went inside the house (likely the home of Simon Peter, their base of operations whenever they were in Capernaum) - whereupon Jesus was immediately pummeled with questions about what in the world He meant by what He had just said outside to the crowds.

Explaining! Jesus and the Disciples (vv. 17-23)

Non-Understanding Disciples (vv. 17-18a)

[17] When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable.

¹⁵ Verse 16 is almost certainly not a part of the original text of Mark's Gospel. It was likely added by a later scribe who was familiar with Mark's style (Mark includes this exhortation to "Listen!" in several places) and thought that it would fit well here, too.

¹⁴ Today, you can will property to a charity or institution at your death, but retain possession over the property and the profit arising from it until you die.

It is tempting for us to think either too highly or not highly enough of the twelve apostles of Jesus. It would be dangerous to put them on a pedestal, but it would be wrong to think of them as dolts. In truth, they were pretty much normal guys who sometimes “got it” and often didn’t.

Here, they didn’t get it. They are acting like my dog, which, when I point at something, looks at my finger, not at the object I am pointing at.

They are just as flabbergasted as the crowds had been. And THAT flabbergasted Jesus.

[18a] And He said to them, “Are you so lacking in understanding also?

And Jesus thought that He had been so clear! Well He takes the time now to clear up what is murky for His followers (and I, for one, am grateful that He did).

Food Cannot Defile (vv. 18b-19)

Defilement is not external (vv. 18-19a)

[18b]...Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, [19a] because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?”

Contrary to what the Pharisees had taught, what you eat and the condition of your hands when you eat it has nothing to do with your status before God.

Whatever you eat travels through the digestive tract and makes no contact with the part of the person that really matters - the heart. Dirty hands or food that might be considered unclean does not defile.

A Jew hearing Jesus’ words here would find his head spinning! Not only would he think of hand-washing, but he would be thinking of the kinds of animals it was unlawful to eat (pigs, etc...), fully laid out in the Law (see Leviticus 17; Genesis 9:4).

Jesus implies here that these things don’t matter anymore.

All foods are clean (v. 19b)

[19b]...(Thus He declared all foods clean.)

That’s Mark, interjecting into the discussion about defilement a comment that was HUGE for the earliest Christians to whom he was writing.

And, while it would take a while for the church to get it all hammered out, the church eventually did get it hammered out and they got it right at a major council. They came to agreement that, in Jesus, food is not worth fighting over and the basis for that decision, recorded in Acts 15 is found right here in Mark 7.¹⁶

Now, you and I can be God-pleasing in every respect AND still enjoy bacon!

So, is moral defilement and moral purity not something that a follower of Jesus has to be concerned about? It is something that we need to be VERY concerned about.

But as Jesus explains, the things that will defile us are not the usual contaminants - unclean food, unwashed hands, people who are needy and far from God. The big defilers are the ugly attitudes to which we cling and the unloving behaviors in which we engage.

Defilement is Internal (vv. 20-23)

[20] And He was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. [21] “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, [22] deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness.” [23] “All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”

¹⁶ See Romans 14:14; Acts 10:9-16; Acts 10-11; Acts 15:1-29

¹⁷ Note that in the parallel passage (Matthew 15:1-20) Matthew lists six items; Mark twelve. Here, the first six items listed are plural; the next six are singular.

And the lesson of Jesus to Peter, James, John - and us! - is that contact with external impurity doesn't defile AND conformity to an external code doesn't purify.

The overarching reality of all that Jesus has to say here is that it's what's inside that counts.

Conclusion:

So, when we come together on Sunday morning, remember that we come to worship.

Race, age, wealth don't matter. Choice of clothing is irrelevant and so is hair style and so is cleanliness (Now, if you mother says these things matter, they matter; they just don't matter to God).

God is interested in knowing if you have come to pay attention to Him. Have you come here to sing with a grateful heart, interact genuinely with those around you, listen to His word as if your life depended on it, so as to leave this place equipped to serve and obey Him? That's what God is after.

And He wants you to know that you don't need to add anything to what He has already said.

Sadly, the temptation always exists to add to what God has said. You know, we just want to be helpful...

But mark it down. When we add rules and regulations and policies and supplements to what God has said, we are just putting up spiritual red tape. The more rules; the more potential for corruption and confusion and coercion.

There is nothing more powerful than the stark, unadorned word of God. It alone penetrates the heart and frees us to change, core to crust, from the inside out.

[2 Corinthians 3:19] Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.