

Wash Our Hearts, Not Our Hands

Intro. The last we heard from Mark was on July 18. He is back today. Five weeks ago he described the Lord seeing people “like sheep without a shepherd,” so he began to teach them many things.

He also had to *un-teach* them about some things.

I. We know a lot about hand-washing. And also about sanitizing “cups and jugs,” and all kinds of things we touch. Although we “religiously” wash our hands before a meal, it isn’t a religious tradition; it is good hygiene. Now, it is about our physical health and safety. Some Pharisees and scribes believed the washings were important for their spiritual health, more ceremonial than hygienic. In addition to the Commandments given to Moses, the first five books of the bible set out serious guidelines for living as God’s people. Over hundreds of years other “lawmakers” added a small interpretation here and a small change there. For example someone,

probably with good intention, decided that some of God’s creation was unclean, bad to eat. Some had come to believe contacts with the world could contaminate them, cutting them off from worship in the temple. Their worries were majorly misplaced and complicated people’s lives, focusing on silly things rather the important: a relationship with God. The Pharisees and scribes in the gospel were not really interested in encouraging the Lord’s disciples to serve God through better hand washing, but rather to force adherence to their *interpretation* of the law. They hid behind empty, outward gestures that did nothing to change the inner self, the heart.

From the commandments given by God, people added and subtracted, made loopholes despite Moses’ warning in our first reading from Deuteronomy. That is really not any different from what the human race continues do. In every legislative session, whether county, state or national,

people keep adding to the thousands of laws we already have. I'm sure each one believes his or her's is an improvement. But are they fair and inclusive? **Concl.** We have a tendency to amend God's laws. We either mistakenly try to read his mind or worse, use God's name to justify our misguided or evil purposes. The Lord gave the scribes and Pharisees a long list of bad things that *come out* of us, springing from *our* evil hearts, *more harmful than incorrect handwashing*. Various religious practices throughout our Catholic tradition had good intention: to improve our relationship with the Lord. Some were very helpful in a certain place and time but later replaced with others better suited to different times. Most were human traditions. We got very used to some. The rule to abstain from meat on every Friday of the year was to remind us to sacrifice, even in a small way. Then it was changed to just the Fridays of Lent. Even it has exceptions for some people: age,

health. Now the requirement is off so it becomes a *free and personal choice* to sacrifice. For some reason in the U.S., fish became the Friday meal. Some people love fish; it wasn't a sacrifice for them. Some people substituted lobster or shrimp for roast beef or chicken. It was the *letter* of the law, but was it the true *spirit* of the law? Our religious practices must not be pretending or playing a role, one definition of a hypocrite. Rather, they must be sincere, inclusive and from our hearts, leading us to the Lord.

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