

Nutrition

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

¹ Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ² they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴ and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" ⁶ He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;

⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."...

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile....

²¹ "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

You know how I often get confused when I first read a scripture...the Pharisees and Jesus were talking about unclean hands when you eat...so what this scripture must be talking about is eating...eating takes our minds to nutrition! I remember coming home from school one day and my mother and her friend were deep in a conversation about "you are what you eat." My mother was always an advocate of eating vegetables and drinking milk, especially since we lived on a farm and there was an abundance of vegetables and milk. Daddy had a sweet tooth, so each dinner was completed with a cake or a cobbler...so I wasn't sure why they were even having this conversation! But after listening a little more, I think my mother's friend Jewel, was trying to convince my mother to stop serving pork to the family. Jewel lived in Chicago and was greatly influenced by talk of which

meats were more or less healthy. Mama, on the other hand, was of the opinion that all food is good and appropriate in moderation.

As it turns out, Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees was not about what to eat, or the manner in which one washes before eating....it was just my usual misunderstanding. It is difficult for modern or non-Jewish Christians to comprehend the issue raised by the Pharisees in this passage, because the idea of physical holiness is alien to our understanding of religion.

Israel's religion included many laws concerning ritual purity or holiness, in conformity with Leviticus 19:2, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." This is pretty frightening to us because we are not exactly sure what this means in light of our sinful nature!

It turns out there is no biblical law about washing hands before eating, but there is a requirement that priests wash hands and feet before ministering at the altar, according to Exod. 30:17-21. This was understood to include washing hands before eating holy meat from the sacrifices. The Pharisees took seriously the command of Exodus 19:6, "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." Therefore they argued that this meant that all Israelites should be as holy as priests, and that consequently all Jews should wash their hands before eating. Mark may have been exaggerating when he suggested that all Jews obey this tradition of the Pharisees. There must have been many others in addition to Jesus and his disciples who ignored the pharisaic rule of hand washing.

Many of our modern translations have difficulty translating the adjective modifying "hands" in our scripture. The Greek word *koinos* does not in itself mean "defiled" (NRSV, REB) or "unclean" (NIV). It is the word for "common," that is, "ordinary." The Pharisees believed that food should be eaten with sanctified hands, not ordinary hands.

In verse 14 Jesus was criticizing not the Pharisees' tradition but their emphasis on ritual purity as that which made Israel acceptable to God. He drew on the prophetic tradition, such as we find in Isaiah: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice?... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?" (Isa. 58:6-7). What makes Israel acceptable to God is not correct performance of ritual acts, such as hand washing, but ethical behavior. Jesus declared that it is not scrupulous observance of the food laws that makes Israel holy, but morality. So Jesus is saying: "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him."

In Leviticus "unclean" refers to a status ritually unacceptable to God, a status that must be rectified through washing, sacrifice, or simply through the passing of the day into evening (e.g., Lev. 11:24). Even normal marital intercourse renders husband and wife "unclean;" they were required to remove the uncleanness through bathing (Lev. 15:18). It is certainly not sinful to incur "uncleanness" in this way, but ritual purity requires that the uncleanness be removed. The Contemporary English Version attempts to make this clear by its paraphrase of verse 15: "The food that you put into your mouth doesn't make you unclean *and unfit to worship God*" [the italicized words interpret "unclean"].

In verses 15, 18-19 Mark understood Jesus' words as rejecting the entire program of Leviticus concerning clean and unclean foods. In fact Mark boldly announced, for the benefit of his Gentile readers and us, "Thus he declared all foods clean" (v. 19b), "cleansing all foods." But this did not mean that Jesus and his disciples immediately changed their diet. We don't hear that Jesus began eating pork! Rather Jesus was employing the kind of argument that depreciates one matter, in order to give special emphasis to another. In any case, Jesus' main point is perfectly clear: what really renders a person "unclean" in God's sight is what

comes out of him or her. It is not what we eat but what we do that really counts with God.

The contrast between what goes into the mouth and what comes out leads us to expect that Jesus would emphasize sins of the mouth, such as lying, foul language, slander, and false promises. But in the list of immoral acts in our scripture, only deceit and slander are sins of the mouth. Instead, attention shifts from the mouth to the heart, from which "evil intentions" (NRSV) or "evil thoughts" (NIV, REB, CEV) come. Jesus stressed that the thought is "father" to the deed. We think a sin before we do it.

Jesus' list of sinful activities is fairly standard, echoing at least four of the ten commandments. It is interesting to compare this list with Paul's "works of the flesh" in Galatians 5:19-21. Missing from Jesus' list are not merely such notable sins of the flesh as drunkenness and carousing but various sins of the spirit such as "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions."

Two items in Jesus' list, both missing from Paul's, are surprising: avarice and pride. These are striking because both refer primarily to attitudes rather than to behavior. "Avarice" or "greed," literally means "a desire to have more." Why is it sinful to want more? Because it can make us stingy toward those who have little. In Luke 12:15 Jesus says, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of *pleonexia*; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Many of us who are innocent of most of the sins in Jesus' list need this advice.

The word translated "pride" is "arrogance" or "haughtiness." Arrogance is a disease of the spirit, reflecting resistance to God as well as contempt for other people. Christians rich and poor must heed the advice of 1 Peter 5:5: "And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" **Douglas R. A. Hare**

This week we could not turn on the television or radio or Internet without hearing about the memorial services for singer Aretha Franklin and U.S. Senator John McCain. I was able to watch several hours of Aretha's service and gospel concert, and all of the senator's service. As Jesus was telling us in this scripture, it is not what Aretha or John ate, how they washed their hands, what they possessed, whether they were orthodox, but how they lived their lives in relationship to their fellow travelers in life's journey. It is not what we eat or how and when we wash our hands, but how we live toward God that determines our nutrition, our health and our holiness.

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