What Defiles Men

Mark 7:1-23

Key Verse: 7:20-21 “He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart,"

For the last several weeks, Jesus taught us how to live by faith. What does “living by faith” mean? Living by faith does not mean we do nothing but wait until God does everything for us. No! To students, living by faith does not mean that they don’t study, but believe that God will give them an A. No! The essence of living by faith is to do our best as students, parents, children, and workers and trust in God in all circumstances. We must study hard to get A pluses, and work hard to support our families, and then put all things in God’s hand and give thanks to God for whatever result comes out. In today’s passage Jesus teaches us two things: 1. What is the essence of the law? 2. What really defiles us.

First, the essence of the law (1-13) The news of Jesus’ healing and teaching ministry reached Jerusalem. So, from Jerusalem the religious leaders, such as the Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law, came to Galilee to investigate Jesus and his ministry. (1) Look at verses 2-4. “a***nd saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)***” People in the Middle East eat food with their hands. In Jesus’ day the Jews’ washing hands before eating food was more than just for hygiene and health. It was a tradition of the elders as a ceremonial cleansing. They extended this tradition to even tools and utensils in the kitchen. This tradition might have been driven from the ceremonial cleansing for Aaron and his sons when they were anointed as priests and before they entered the tabernacle. (Ex 29:4, Lev 8:6,10; 16:4) At that time Aaron and his sons must have been washed with water, and the altar sprinkled with blood. But washing hands before eating was not from Moses’ law, but from the tradition made by the elders to consecrate themselves from the gentiles. By washing their hands, they felt that they were clean and righteous.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law continued to accuse Jesus’ disciples. “***Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands***?” (5) How did Jesus answer them? Look at verses 6-7. “***He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”*** Jesus called the Pharisees and the teachers of the law ‘hypocrites’, which means ‘playing actors.’ Hypocrites are those whose real lives are different from their acting. Jesus pointed out their hypocrisy which accused his disciples as violators of their tradition. Jesus had two ways to defend his disciples. First, he quoted the prophecy of Isaiah. (Is 29:13) At that time the high priests offered to God all kinds of sacrifice. They killed sheep and goats and burnt them according to Moses’ law. They had a godly form as people of God. But according to Isaiah, their hearts were far from the Lord. They worshiped the Lord in vain. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and the teachers of the law in verse 8. “***You have let go of the command of God and are holding on to human tradition***.” Jesus meant that they nullified the command of God in order to keep their tradition. Which is higher between the command of God and human tradition?

Next, Jesus used an example. Look at verses 9-13. “***And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the command of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death. But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God) --then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”*** In Jesus’ day there was a devotion program called ‘Corban’ which means, ‘a gift devoted to God’. The purpose of this program was to encourage young people to devote themselves to God. But some manipulated Corban to avoid their duties and responsibilities in supporting their parents. They said, “I am in Corban, so I don’t need to support my family.” Jesus rebuked their hypocrisy in violating the command of God, which is to honor one’s parents. The essence of Corban is to love God and love their parents as themselves. They became hypocrites when they had no love of God in them. Jesus rebuked their hypocrisy in John 5:42, “*but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts.*” God rebuked the Israelites and their hypocrisy through Isaiah because they did not have the love of God in their hearts in their worship. God rebuked them saying, “*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*”

What is the essence of the law? What is the spirit of the law? Paul said that the fulfillment of the law is love. (Ro 13:10) The essence and the spirit of the command of God is love; love God with all your hearts, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and love others as yourselves. Jesus said that this is the greatest commandment of God. (Mt 22:36-40) What is the essence of our worship? Why do we come to church every Sunday? We worship God because we love him, honor him, please him, and give thanks to him. If we worship without the love of God, we worship him in vain. Yesterday we met for outreach. Why do we go out for fishing? We go out for fishing because we love God and love our brothers and sisters. In John 21:15 Jesus asked Peter if he loved him before he asked Peter to feed his sheep. If we don’t love God, our outreach and fishing may become our tradition or obligation. While the command of God is the essence, the tradition of the elders is the phenomena. By the lens of Hebrews, if the command of God is real, the tradition of the elders is the shadow. Phenomena cannot be above essence and shadow cannot overcome reality. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law set aside the commands of God in order to observe their traditions. (9) Observing the traditions is not bad or not committing sin, but following their traditions without the love of God made them superficial hypocrites.

Second, what makes us unclean (14-23) In verse 15 Jesus continues to defend his disciples and concludes his statement. Look at verse 15. “***Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”*** Jesus concluded that his disciples were innocent because they didn’t do anything which defiled them against the law. This is because food eaten by unwashed hands did not make them unclean. After Jesus had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. (17) How did Jesus answer them? Look at verses 18-19" “***Are you so dull? Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.***)” What goes into our stomach does not make us unclean because it will come out from our body in a bathroom. What makes us unclean, dirty, and evil is those which come out of our heart. Jesus explained what they are in verses 20-23. “***He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”*** What remains inside comes out of our heart. According to Sigmund Freud, the Austrian psychologist, there are repressed instinctive desires in our subconsciousness which are called ‘*Id*’. This *Id* remains in our heart suppressed like an iceberg. This *Id* comes outside being purified and moralized through the filter of *ego* and *Superego*. According to Paul the Apostle we call this process ‘self-control’, which is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. (Gal 5:23) If our inner desires are not filtered by self-control, what comes out from our heart makes us unclean and evil. For example, when you get angry, you need to calm down and take time to manage your anger. Take a deep breath and pray for God’s help. This is the process of self-control. If you fail this self-control, you may blow up and lose your cool. Paul said in Ephesians 4:26, “*In your anger do not sin” Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.”*

As what comes out of our heart is important, so what goes into our heart is important, too. This is because what is stored up in our heart comes out from our heart. In Matthew 12:22-37 Jesus rebuked the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who had accused him saying that Jesus drove out demons by the power of demons. Jesus said that the Pharisees told and revealed what was stored in their hearts such as hatred, jealousy, and murder. Jesus rebuked them saying, “*You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.*” (Mt 12:34-35) What goes into our heart should be filtered by the word ‘holiness.’ What we see, what we listen, what we think, and what we desire need to be filtered with holiness. One day I was listening to an old Korean popular song. Soon my wife followed to sing the song. What I watched and listened to immediately influenced my next person. We are free to think, imagine, and desire, but all these need to be filtered. If we lose this filtering process, we store up evil thoughts and desires which will come out any time and make us unclean. James warns us, “*Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death*.” (Ja 1:15)

What is the point of Jesus’ teaching today? What is the essence of his rebuke? Love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our soul, and with all our strength, and love others as ourselves. Jesus loved even his enemies who nailed him on the cross. (Lk 23:34) People look at our outward appearances, but God looks at our hearts. When we love God and love others with our heart, other’s mistakes and shortcomings will not become a big deal. When we love God, we worship him in spirit and truth. Love is the fulfillment of the law and the essence of Jesus’ teaching, our life, and ministry. Amen!