

Mark 7:1-13
Is Our Religion Getting in God's Way?
WRCoB 2.16.20

Organized religion is in decline.

Sunday morning worship once bustled with activity.

Now, many churches feel empty
With more space in pews than people.

When asked why people don't attend church
You'll often hear that church is filled
With self-righteous, hypocrites.

Recent surveys prove this true.

It's not all churches, not all Christians
But enough for the overall perception
To be what it is.

There is a certain amount of what is called
Pharisaical behavior in Christianity.

Behavior similar to the Pharisees of Jesus' time.

It's like the account before us.

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Our scripture takes us to the region of Galilee.

Jesus and his disciples had crossed the Sea of Galilee
From Bethsaida to Gennesaret.

And as they traveled from village to village
Preaching, teaching, and healing
The people brought the sick to Jesus.

In every village they visited
The people begged Jesus to heal them.

And all who touched or were touched by Jesus were healed.

In one of the villages, Pharisees from Jerusalem
Came and observed what was going on.

They noticed Jesus and his disciples
Sit down to eat food purchased in the market
And that they didn't wash their hands before they ate.

Well, la-di-da!
I get nailed on this one all the time!

I stand at the back of the sanctuary
And shake everybody's hand.

I, then, go into the Gathering Room to grab a snack
And just as I'm raising a fork full of food to my mouth
Judith asks, "Did you wash your hands"?

Dang! Busted.

Really, I'm glad she calls me on it.
I know it's a good thing, I just forget.

Washing hands prevents infection. We know that!

We wash our hands for the same reason they did back then
To cleanse ourselves from unclean things.

Stick to the rules and you won't get sick.

I mean, think about it from the Pharisees' perspective.

Jesus had been ministering to the sick, right?

He's touching and being touched
By all kinds of sick people
With all kinds of infectious diseases.

No mask. No gloves. No antibacterial dispensers.

If Judith would have been there
She would say the same thing.

"Jesus, you didn't wash your hands!"

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Maybe Jesus was tired!

Maybe it was the Pharisees' tone of voice.

Maybe it was the fact
That up to that point
They hadn't said or done anything.

They just stood there acting smug.

And then, the only time they did say anything
They criticized Jesus for not washing his hands.

It was just too much for Jesus.

“You honor me with your lips
But your hearts are far from me.”

Of all the groups of people Jesus associated with
He really struggled to say anything nice
About the Pharisees.

It bothered Jesus that the religious leaders
Were more concerned with “washing hands”
Than ministering to those in need.

Jesus wasn't opposed to hand washing.

What Jesus had a problem with
Was in the thinking that by washing hands
They were fulfilling the will of God.

All the while not lifting a finger to help Jesus
Minister to the needs of others.

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While he is on the subject of questionable religious practices
Jesus goes off on another issue that bothered him
A Jewish ritual called Corban.

Mark 7:10-12 (NLT) For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: ‘Honor your father and mother’¹¹ But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, ‘Sorry, I can’t help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.’¹² In this way, you let them disregard their needy parents.

So anyone making a Corbin vow
Dedicated money to the temple treasury
That money was no longer available.

By doing this, one looked pious and righteous before others
But at the expense of their poor, neglected parents.

Jesus says it directly violates the Ten Commandments.

Nothing bugged Jesus more than
Religious practices getting in the way of God's will.

The way he saw it
It was not God's will to fill the church's coffers
While disregarding the needs of aging parents.

That the "practicing of faith"
Was far more important than the "practices of faith".

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Last week's story of the Good Samaritan
Is another example of religion
Getting in the way of God's will.

As you remember,
A man was on his way from Jericho to Jerusalem
And was robbed and beaten
And left to die by the side of the road.

A priest came upon him, saw him, and hurried past.

A Levite also came upon him
Seeing him by the side of the road also hurried past.

Do you know why they hurried past?

It's not that they were unsympathetic.

They may have been quite moved by what they saw.

But by touching him, or his blood

Or perhaps if he had died, his dead body

Would have made them ceremonially unclean.

Their "religion" prohibited it!

It was the Samaritan, not confined by religious practices

That ministered to the man in need.

The priest and Levite's religious practices

Prevented them from doing the right and ethical thing.

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And so, the question I ask is this

Is our religion getting in God's way?

Are we more like the Pharisees

Chastised by Jesus for misplaced priorities?

Or are we more like Jesus

Attending to the needs of others

Despite or over/against our religious practices?

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A Barna study back in 2013 addressed the same question.

They asked self-identified Christians 20 questions
With the goal of determining whether they
Exhibited behavior more akin to Jesus
Or the self-righteous Pharisee.

They categorized the questions into four groups.

Actions and attitudes that were Christ-like.

And actions and attitudes that were self-righteous.

The survey discovered that more Christians in the U.S.
Had the attitude and action of a Pharisee (51%).

Their attitudes and actions characterized
Self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

On the other end of the spectrum

Only 14% of today's U.S. Christian
One out of every seven Christians
Reflected attitudes and actions consistent with Jesus.

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Can our religion get in God's way?

You bet it can.

So what's the problem?

Jesus says our hearts are not in the right place.

Jesus says, it is not what goes in that defiles a person
But what comes out of the heart that defiles.

And it doesn't matter what we do
Whether we never miss a Sunday morning
Give more than 10% of our income
Or say and do all the right things

If our heart isn't in it, it's empty religion.

The hypocrisy and self-righteousness will show.

Jesus didn't come to bring a new religion.

He came to start a movement
A movement of restored relationships with God.

**Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God
And put a new and right spirit within me.**

**¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
And do not take your holy spirit from me**

**¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
And sustain in me a willing spirit.**

Like any relationship
We need to approach it with honesty and sincerity.

We need humble and contrite hearts.

We need to admit we don't have it together
That we need something we don't have
That we need Jesus
That we need one another.

In my opinion, what today's church needs
More than anything else is authenticity!

If the church is perceived as self-righteous and hypocritical
It's because we're not being true to God
Nor true to ourselves
Nor true to one another.

It's all a big show.

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However, there is such good news in all of this.

Jesus started a movement,

We call it church.

And. It. Will. Not. Fail.

It will not fail

Despite the fact it is filled with people like you and me.

Okay, so the U.S. church has seen a decline.

Church as an institution may not continue, as we know it.

But the movement started by Jesus Christ
Will not die. It will flourish.

Because despair and hopelessness
Depravity and brokenness in the U.S.
Is on the rise.

And the church of Jesus Christ
In all its authenticity will be there.

A healing community of faith
Nurturing the presence of Christ's Spirit.

A place where Christ heals
And cleanses the heart and head.

Where people come together just as they are
Broken in spirit
And leave with renewed hope and vision.

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Jesus hasn't given up on the church.

And neither should we.

Where Christ is, hope remains.

Let's just remember to not let our religion
Get in the way of God's will and way.

It's good to keep our hands clean.

It is better to cleanse our hearts
In the spirit and the blood of Jesus Christ.

Amen.