

Boring Rituals

Mark 7:1-23

Jesus attacks 'traditions of the elders'.

It looks like top brass Pharisees have come down from Jerusalem to derail the Jesus train.

I'm wondering why would all the disciples who had, from when they were toddlers, been brought up washing their hands before they eat, a practice that they had had instilled in them, now start to dispense with that and just tuck into their dinner with unwashed hands? In the same way, the religious authorities dictated that cookery utensils and crockery had to be meticulously clean. Nowt wrong with that, but really, is it the job of the clergy to enforce that rule or the Food Standards Agency? The Pharisees like to be in charge of every aspect of everyone's lives. It's a power thing.

Note that the Pharisees were critical of the disciples rather than Jesus. It's likely that Jesus had subtly taught the disciples not to be bothered washing their hands and on this occasion He had, but His disciples hadn't. Maybe this was a carefully engineered trap that the Pharisees walked into, giving Jesus the opportunity to castigate them about their observances.

How do these traditions start? Maybe what starts as a good idea and a bit of common sense gets elevated to be on par with God's law. Maybe there might be something in the Bible that gets blown out of all proportion, for example - Exodus 30:17-21, Psalm 24:3-4 but becomes more important than the people they serve and even God.

So, how can hand hygiene be a problem? This passage is not rebuking hand hygiene, it's about rituals and observances. We were brought up that cleanliness is next to Godliness but there's no scriptural authority supporting that.

Is there anything wrong with these rituals? In themselves, maybe not but to have them incorporated into your faith, and when not observing them becomes a sin, then that's when we've crossed the line, in effect we've taken on God's job, 'this is what God wants' when He's not said anything of the sort - the is writing God's law.

Jesus quotes from Isaiah 29:13. This is also mentioned as a problem in Isaiah 24:5. OK, so is this a Pharisee problem if we don't ritually wash hands before everything we eat? Well maybe if :-

I go to church every Sunday but your heart is far from God.
I sing hymns and choruses every Sunday but your heart is far from God.
I give 10% in the collection but my heart is far from God.
I go to midweek Bible study but my heart is far from God.
I practice fasting regularly but my heart is far from God.

Then Jesus properly lays into the Pharisees for going even further, not only adding to God's law but also replacing part of it. He explains and condemns the tradition of Corban. Let's look at the laws that Jesus refers to. Deuteronomy 5:15 and Leviticus 20:9. We're commanded to look after, love and honour our parents, even when maybe we don't always agree with them and no matter what they might do or not do or say; never curse them; it was a capital offence. So how would aged parents feel if their offspring were to break the news that they'll have to fend for themselves because the savings they'd set aside, they'd just donated to the Temple? Jesus tells the Pharisees that that would be breaking God's law but that they had instigated a tradition they'd called Corban that trumped God's law. Jesus warned that there were many similar examples.

After this, Jesus then addresses the crowd and clarifies.

He tells us that what we eat isn't going to make us unclean before God (it might make us ill) but it won't put a barrier between us and God. Rather, it's going to be what's already inside us that's going to be the problem, stuff like hate, greed, lust ... sin.

This was something that Jesus decided that the disciples hadn't quite grasped what He's said, even though it was their hands that had been the trigger for this situation.

He re-explained that food goes in your mouth, down your throat, in your stomach, through your guts and out the other end. It doesn't touch your heart. The heart of course in this context is what's front and centre in your life, the things you love and cherish, like God and Jesus, your spouse, your family or a heart can be corrupt and full what Jesus describes in verses 21 - 22. For more info Matthew 12:33-37.

Can we think of any modern-day rituals and observances that are maybe equivalent to washing hands?

What is the point, benefit or purpose of reciting: 'For what we're about to receive, may the Lord make us truly grateful.'?

What about prayer? Do we have a genuine one to one conversation or just rattle off a shopping list?

How about communion? Yes, this is required of us by Jesus, Mark 14:22-25 and 1 Corinthians 11:25-26. But when you take the bread and then the wine, are you merely routinely eating and drinking in observance of a ritual or are you genuinely reflecting on Jesus's suffering, what He was going through and the price He was paying on that cross for our rescue and salvation? Paul instructs us to examine ourselves before communion in 1 Corinthians 11: 27-29.

How about going to church? Do you go because it's Sunday or do you go to meet, share, worship, pray and learn?

We can do the right thing for the wrong motive.

Another example is that some churches advocate praying to Mary and the Saints and going on pilgrimages to holy sites. In Catholic and high C of E churches, the priest or the vicar washes his hands during mass.

Jesus seems to be laying the foundation of the New Testament covenant that worship was more about relationship with God rather than following laws, rituals and observances. For example in Acts 10:15 all food is declared as Kosher