

The Heart of the Problem

Mark 7:1-23

Pastor Bryan Clark

It was the summer of 1998. Our family was in Bozeman, Montana visiting Patti's family. On this particular day I was the only one home. Everyone was gone—which kind of makes a statement in itself, doesn't it? There was a trampoline there and I felt it calling me. When I was younger, I half lived on a trampoline and I thought, *I wonder if I can still do any of the old moves.*

So I ... where do you think this is going? I started bouncing on the trampoline and it wasn't more than just a few minutes and I absolutely could not breathe. Suddenly I broke out in a sweat and I couldn't breathe, so I stopped. I went into the house and for 20 minutes I just poured sweat and had trouble breathing. I came out of that thinking, *I am in horrible shape.* I was only 39 years old and I thought, *This is too young to be in that kind of shape.* So as soon as we got back to Lincoln I joined a gym and started working out. I was lifting weights; I was doing the treadmill. I was addressing my problem.

Well, that was in August. That December, through a series of events, I ended up at my family doctor. He took one listen to my heart and said, "You have a problem." And in less than 24 hours I was scheduled for open-heart surgery. I had a birth defect in my aorta valve. Where it should be a normal flow of blood, I had a pinhole which was squirting a little bit of blood out. In the words of my cardiologist, "There is no human explanation why you are alive."

Through the grace of God and an excellent medical team, the issue was addressed, and I've been full speed ever since. But you know, it is interesting. I could have worked out two hours a day, seven days a week, and I would not have addressed my problem at all—because what I was addressing was a symptom. And until I understood that the problem was my heart, nothing was going to change.

Do you think that ever happens to us spiritually? Do we ever find ourselves trying to manage our symptoms, when in reality the heart of the problem is a problem with our heart? I think we're often guilty of what I call "sin management." We have a temper problem; we have a problem with our tongue; we have attitudes; we have behavior problems; we have habits and addictions. On and on we could go with our list. And sometimes we find ourselves just trying to manage these things and we're really not making much progress. The reason is because we're managing symptoms instead of getting to the root cause of the problem.

In Mark chapter 7 Jesus talks about that. One of the things I find interesting is when you read through the New Testament, there is absolutely no question that one of the greatest concerns that the New Testament writers had for you and me as believers is that we would get so caught up into legalism that we would lose the dynamic love relationship with Jesus Christ. Almost every New Testament writer talks about it and shares his concern that this is going to happen.

Well, it's not hard to understand when you go back to the Gospel, because when God became flesh and walked on this earth it was not the secularists who opposed Him. It was the religious crowd; it was the legalists that constantly opposed Jesus.

In Mark chapter 7 we have another one of those encounters. I think at this point in the Gospel Jesus is teaching and training His leadership team more than anything else. And I think this passage is more of the same. The Pharisees offer this encounter that makes for a teachable moment, as Jesus turns around and uses it to teach His disciples that ultimately what matters is the *heart*, not just managing people's symptoms.

It's also worth noting that at the end of verse 23 of chapter 7 there is a closing to what's called the Galilean ministry. In verse 24 there's a change of location and it really begins the countdown to the cross. At this point we're about a year away from the cross. But there's a fairly dramatic shift here. Jesus' attention moves away from the masses and to the leadership team, and it's really now a countdown to the cross.

Mark chapter 7, verse 1:

The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem. (*NASB)

Now we've seen this group before, not necessarily these exact same people, but Jerusalem was the head office. These are the big shots from the head office. These are the heavy hitters here.

And had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (vs. 2)

Now, I don't normally side with the Pharisees, but as a recovering germaphobic, I mean, *Come on, people, wash your hands*. But that isn't really what this is about. This has nothing to do with hygiene; it has everything to do with the religious rules of the Pharisees.

We know that Mark intended his Gospel to be read by the Gentiles. It's not primarily a Jewish audience but a Gentile audience. We know that for several reasons, but one of the things that comes up many times in the Gospel is that Mark explains things that would have been very known to a Jewish audience but not known to a Gentile audience. And this is an example of that. In verses 3 and 4 he's explaining something the Jews would have understood; the Gentiles would not have. So he has to explain it:

(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) (vs. 3-4)

Now to understand exactly what's being said here, at the end of the Book of Malachi to the beginning of the Gospels, there is about a 400-year time period. And it was in that time period that the Pharisees, the scribes, the synagogue all came to pass. That's really where the scribes and Pharisees got their power. They would stand before the people and read the Hebrew Scriptures, and then they would make comments on the Scriptures.

Their intentions were very good: they wanted the people to walk in obedience to the Law. The problem was they did not trust that God could do that through people. They believed that they had to artificially make it happen. So they became very specific about what it meant to observe the Law. For example, when they were dealing with issues of the Sabbath, they

would define very clearly: you can do this, but you can't do that. Then somebody would raise the question, "Well, can I do this?" And they would say, "Well, you can walk 10 steps but you can't walk 15 steps." They had a very detailed list of the do's and don'ts in order to observe the Law.

This became known as the oral tradition; it also became known as the tradition of the elders—the Oral Law. About 200 years after Christ, the oral law was actually written down and was known as the Mishna, which still is a significant document for orthodox Jews. But at this time it was still just an oral law, but it was very binding in the minds of the people. As a matter of fact, their oral law was as binding as the very commandments of God.

That included this idea of cleansing: that before you could eat you had to go through this ceremonial cleansing. And it was very strict. It had to do with the fact that you washed your hands and there was a certain way you had to do it. Your hands had to tilt up with your fingers open. The water was poured from the top to the bottom; it had to run off at your wrist. Then there was a certain way that you scrubbed your hands. And when you were done it went the other way. The water was poured at the wrist; everything dripped off the fingers. And if you didn't do it exactly right, you had to do it all again.

That's what they are talking about here. The disciples didn't do that. And then Mark mentions that they had all kinds of goofy ideas about cleansing pots and cups and pans. That's kind of the loose translation, but that's basically what he's saying.

The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." (vs. 5-8)

One of the things that has impressed me again as I've read through the Gospel of Mark is how good Jesus was at not getting drawn into the accusations of the legalists. One of the things legalists are very good at—because they're always pointing the finger and they're always condemning and judging—is putting us on the defensive. We often find ourselves trying to explain ourselves. And that puts them in control, which is what they want.

One of the things that strikes me as I read through the Gospels is that Jesus never got drawn into that. Jesus never played that game. As a matter of fact, He would always turn the finger the other way and say, "Now, wait a minute, *you're* the problem." In this particular text He called them hypocrites: "You're the problem; you're hypocrites."

The word "hypocrites" came out of the Greek theater. It's a word that means "to wear a mask." When you are in a play, you pretend to be somebody that you're not. You put a mask on. That's what Jesus was saying: "You pretend to be these religious leaders that are very spiritual and very wise, but the reality is you're wearing a mask—really you're just selfish, arrogant, self-righteous men." He defines this by quoting from Isaiah: "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me."

These people knew what to say; they said the right words. But the reality is, they didn't have a heart for God. It's very important to remember that just because people say the right words it doesn't mean that they're godly. It doesn't mean that God has their heart. In verse 7 He

says, “As it is written: ‘...IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME {*it means their worship was empty; it had no meaning*}, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.’ Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”

Jesus was saying, “You have considered your traditions, your manmade laws, to be actually more important than the very commands of God.” They were more passionate, more zealous, about their own rules than they were about the things that God said. So He’s going to give them an example of that.

He was also saying to them, “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.” (vs. 9)

Jesus referred to them as hypocrites, and this is an example of that. “You pick and choose what laws you’re going to follow, and you pick yours and you ignore God’s.”

That’s one thing I have found to be very consistent among legalists: they’re very good at picking and choosing the laws they want to emphasize, and they ignore a whole bunch of others. I remember growing up that I used to hear these preachers rant and rave about the fact that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. They would condemn people who smoked, but at the same time they would be 50 pounds overweight. And you’re thinking, *C’mon, people, if the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit....* You know, there’s just so much hypocrisy in that.

That’s exactly what the Pharisees were doing. So Jesus explains this.

“For Moses said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER’; and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH’; but you say, ‘If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),’ you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother, thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that.” (vs. 10-13)

Jesus went back and He picked up the Old Testament Law that says we are to honor father and mother and another verse that says if you speak evil against them you are to be put to death. Now, we could really get off on a rabbit trail in trying to explain all the dynamics of the Law. But for the sake of our discussion, let’s understand that Jesus brings that up just to say, “This is the command and obviously it’s very important to God; this is not a command that should be easily dismissed.”

But the elders had come up with their own rule, and that rule was: Any property or any assets, any of your money that you wanted to call Corban—which just means this is dedicated to God—was off-limits from creditors or anybody else. So if a creditor would come knocking at the door and say, “You know, you’ve got all this property” they could say, “Now, wait a minute, that’s Corban”—which means it belongs to God—“you can’t touch that.”

So I suppose originally the intentions were very good. But it became this loophole to protect themselves. When the Old Testament says, “Honor your father and mother” there is a message of respect in appreciating them for who they are, but really that word “honor” has much more of an intention that we are to take care of them. In an ancient culture they did not have Social Security; they did not have Medicare; they did not have nursing homes. They didn’t have any of that. And if the family didn’t take care of their elderly, the elderly just

died. So “Honor your father and mother” had a responsibility which included financial responsibility to make sure they’re taken care of.

Jesus is addressing the fact that these scribes and Pharisees had put this law into place; and while their parents desperately needed help, the only resources they had that they could use to help them (and the Pharisees, by the way, were quite wealthy), all of it was Corban. That means they would say to their struggling parents, “You wouldn’t want me to take that which is God’s, would you? You wouldn’t want me to break my vow, would you?” In essence their tradition became more important than God’s commandment and they didn’t do what God told them to do.

The strange thing about this dedication to God—calling your assets Corban—is that it didn’t necessarily go to God. On any given moment they could take that property and sell it and pocket the money, so it wasn’t like they even lost it. It was just a legal loophole to be selfish. And Jesus says, “You do lots of things like that.”

It’s worthwhile to stop and think about this concept of the traditions of men versus the commandments of God. It’s very important that we stay dialed into that which is from God and that which is simply a part of our tradition. Sometimes I enter into discussions with people that go to other churches and we’ll talk about things. They’ll tell me what they believe, and I’ll ask what I think is a logical question, “Can you help me understand where the Bible teach that?” And often their response indicates that it’s not even a relevant question. They don’t care and they couldn’t begin to even find that. That’s just their tradition. What they are saying is that the traditions of man have become more important than the commands of God.

You know, the Bible is very clear that salvation is through Jesus alone. But there are some traditions that believe it is through Jesus plus this, this, this and this. And at that point there has to be a choice. Which is ultimately right? The command of God or the traditions of men?

There’s absolutely no question about what the purpose of the church is. We’ve phrased it as: *to glorify God by seeking to present every person complete in Christ*—which is really a restatement of the Great Commission. But really, throughout the Bible, the purpose is evident that we are to trust Jesus as Savior; and as that life is cultivated in us, we are to go out and reach others for Christ and bring them in, so they can be built up in their faith and then they go out. That’s the purpose of the church. That’s why we exist. That’s the mission until Jesus comes back. And there’s no question about that. That’s the command of God.

But it is easy to get so sidetracked by the traditions of men that sometimes we lose sight of that. Have you ever thought about how much of everything we do is simply the tradition of men? The way we are structured; the way we are organized; the way we do Sunday school; the way we do groups—in all of this we’re trying to be as effective as we can be, but these are the traditions of men. Sometimes people get so worked up about this stuff that they lose sight of what we’re really about.

There’s a very strong message in the New Testament that we have to be unified: united in spirit, intent on one purpose. We have to let go of selfish ambition and think of others as more important than ourselves—Philippians chapter 2. Now it’s not uniformity; it’s not that we’re a cookie cutter and there’s no margin for disagreement. But we do have to understand at the end of the day we have to be unified and lock arms and accomplish the mission. That’s the whole deal. It’s very easy to get sidetracked with all of the traditions of men.

Years ago, author Becky Pippert told the story about a church in the Pacific Northwest that was very conservative, but they decided they wanted to try to reach the university campus across the street from them. They had no idea how to even start that, so they just put up a couple of signs to welcome the students.

There was a certain hippie by the name of Bill who decides to give it a try. Now, Bill doesn't know much about church. He wears a tee shirt that's ripped and has holes in it. He has ragged old jeans, is barefoot, and has long, wild hair sticking up everywhere. But he comes. He comes late when the service is already in progress, so he starts down the aisle, looking for a place to sit. There is no place to sit, so Bill keeps coming toward the front. He can't find a seat, and finally he gets up to the front and just crosses his legs and plops down on the carpet in the middle of the aisle.

To hear Becky Pippert tell the story, the people are just stunned. I mean, they don't know what to do with him and they don't know what to do with his behavior—this isn't the way they do church. She said you could have cut the tension with a knife. About that time an old elderly deacon gets up in the back row. This is a very successful man, very well-dressed in a three-piece suit, a gold watch, a gold chain—very elegant and dignified. He gets up and he starts walking down the aisle. You could hear him shuffle and you could hear the click of his cane as he came down the aisle.

Becky Pippert says by that time the whole service had stopped and everybody was staring at this. The people were processing in their minds, *You can't blame this elderly deacon for what he's about to do*. I mean, this guy had come in and broken this long list of their rules and traditions, and how could you blame him for what he was about to do? So everybody was just waiting for the confrontation. Finally he made it up to the front. Then, in an act that shocked everyone, he laid his cane down and in what seemed like it took forever, he got down on the floor cross-legged and sat through the entire service next to Bill, so Bill wouldn't have to worship alone.

You see, that is a magnificent example of somebody who saw the difference between the traditions of men and the commandment of God. Now, I'm guessing Bill violated a long list of traditions. But this man was able to see that there's a difference between the traditions of men and the command of God.

It's very important for us to remember that here as a body. When people walk through our doors they might be in various states of dress; they might have bright blue hair and a piercing through their nose; and all kinds of stuff that's a little bit different than how you operate. But let's be very careful that the traditions of men don't become more important than the commandment of God—that these people are loved and reached and introduced to a relationship with Jesus Christ. Even out in our neighborhoods and out in the marketplace and at our schools, let's be very careful that we understand the mission and don't get sidetracked by the traditions of men.

I do have a growing concern that we are drawing God way too much into politics. This may come as a shock to some of you, but God is not a Republican. He's not. He's not a Republican; He's not a Democrat. We make a huge mistake when we start identifying God with a political party. We make a huge mistake when out in the marketplace and in our neighborhoods we get in these big conflicts with people over politics. Those are the traditions of men rather than focusing on the commandment of God.

I don't care if my neighbor is a Democrat or Republican. And I'll guarantee you, I'm not going to get in a fight with him over it. He may have lots of things in his life that I disagree with, but I'm not going to get hung up on those things. I want to build a relationship with him; I want him to trust me; I want to introduce him to Jesus. That's the command from God.

That's what Jesus is talking about: how easy it is to allow the traditions of men to become more important than the commandment of God. He turns His attention now to the disciples.

After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man." ["If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."] When He had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man." (vs. 14-23)

This was quite a shocking statement to the Jews, who had such an emphasis on various foods, believing some made them more spiritual than others. Jesus is really wiping that clean and saying, "You know, it's not the externals that end up changing your heart. The externals are just symptoms of what's inside. And until God changes what's inside, you'll never be able to do anything more than just manage the symptoms." Jesus goes through this list, which is just a sampling of various sins. And He ultimately says, "You know, these come from the inside out. You can't manage them on the outside; but it has to start with a personal relationship with Christ where He changes your heart. And then it changes from the inside out."

This is absolutely critical to understand the discipleship ministry at Lincoln Berean. Our goal is not to try to get you to conform to a long list of rules, of do's and don'ts. But it is to try to cultivate within you a heart for God, that you would enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ and God would change your heart. Our responsibility in discipleship is to fan that flicker into a flame and do everything we can to help cultivate that heart. Out of a right heart flows obedience and right living.

It's very important for us to understand that the externals can never change the heart, but the heart has to be changed to change the externals. We believe the two primary environments for that to happen at Lincoln Berean are the large corporate worship, which you've found, and a LifeGroup, a small group where these things can be processed and you can better understand what it means to know God and to walk in His ways.

One of the things the legalist struggles with is not believing that God is going to do what He said He would do. The legalist just doesn't believe that God is capable of changing the heart. So the legalist is concerned, *Unless I put up my manmade fences, I think I'm going to spin out of control. I just don't trust that God has done what He said He would do.* And so they make

their rules for themselves and then they apply them to everyone else. They think that somehow if they manage the externals it will eventually change the internal.

It would be very similar to me not believing the doctors when they said, “Your heart is fixed; everything’s okay; you can go back to life.” But if I don’t believe them and I don’t think that’s really true, I start to think through what happened: *Let’s see, one of the things that happened was I was bouncing on the trampoline. So I’m going to make a rule: no more bouncing on the trampoline. As a matter of fact, not only for me but for my family, for all of my kids: no more bouncing on the trampoline—that’s off-limits. In fact, I’m very concerned for you. I would hate to see that happen to you. So now I’m going to make a rule for the entire church: no trampolines allowed. Everybody that’s got a trampoline, I want you to sell it, give the money to the campaign. No trampolines! Another thing that happened is Montana has high altitude. So I’ve made a rule for my family: no more trips to Montana. As a matter of fact, I think that should be a rule for everybody because I’m concerned for you: nobody’s allowed to go to Montana. And the altitude is kind of high in Colorado, too. So Colorado’s off-limits. There are some flat places in Wyoming; that’s okay. But you can’t go in the mountains of Wyoming.*

Now we laugh at that and say, “Well, that’s kind of stupid.” That’s legalism. It happens all the time. People don’t believe that God is really changing a heart, so they make these rules in order to deal with their own insecurities. But then the rule has to apply to everybody. And pretty soon life is oriented around these rules rather than a dynamic, life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

One of the unique things about Lincoln Berean Church is that we are really a gathering of people from many different denominations and traditions. We have people who come from Lutheran, from Methodist, from Presbyterian, from Catholic, from Adventist, from Baptist. It probably would be a long, long list. It’s very important for you to understand that we really aren’t trying to convert you to Bereanism. This isn’t an attempt to try to start a whole other movement of Bereanism.

The intent is very simple. Can’t we all, from our different backgrounds and traditions, come together and open up this Book and together say that the commandments of God have got to be more important than our traditions, our opinions, our backgrounds? We need to be willing to subject our traditions, our past learning and our opinions to the Word of God and allow the Word of God to shape what we believe is true, in order that we together might cultivate a living, dynamic relationship with Jesus. And out of that relationship, out of a changed heart, will flow a life that more and more looks like Jesus.

In the end, isn’t that really all that’s going to matter? I can guarantee you, God is not going to check labels when you get to heaven. All He’s going to care about is: what did you do with Jesus? And how did you respond to His truth in conforming you and shaping you into the image of God? The reality is there are a lot of things we have to do in terms of strategy and structure that are the traditions of men just to operate as a ministry. You may not always agree; there’s room for disagreement. But in the end, can’t we lock arms and say, “What really matters is that we have a heart for God and we are busy about what God has called us to be and to do to accomplish the purpose of the church”? Is my heart right with God? Am I willing to subject my traditions and my opinions and my background to God’s Word, that He might define what’s true, and that I might distinguish between the traditions of men and the commands of God?”

December 11/12, 2004

Study Questions
The Good News About Jesus According to Mark
The Heart of the Problem
Mark 7:1-23
Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What is the difference between treating the symptoms and treating the root cause?
2. Do you think the following are spiritual symptoms or root problems? Why?
 - Anger
 - Immorality
 - Fear or anxiety
 - Rebellion
 - Issues of the tongue
 - Gossip
 - Overspending
 - Critical spirit
3. To address these problems, are we going to be more effective going after the symptoms or the root problem? Why?

Bible Study

1. Read Mark 7:1-13. Why does Jesus call the religious leaders “hypocrites”?

What is a religious hypocrite?
2. Are all legalists hypocrites? Why or why not?
3. In what ways do we honor the traditions of men over the commandments of God?
4. Read Mark 7:14-23. What is Jesus saying to the disciples?

What does He mean?
5. Can external “fences” change these behaviors according to Jesus?
6. Bryan stated in his message that legalists don’t trust that God really changes hearts, so they don’t trust that their own hearts and the hearts of others are really changed. Therefore they revert to man-made “fences” to attempt to control behavior. Do you agree or disagree with this statement and why?
7. If the statement in question #6 is true, what is the solution for our bent toward legalism?

Application

1. What are the top three issues you struggle with in your Christian life? Are these symptoms or root causes?
2. Given what you've learned in this text from Mark 7:1-23, what is the key to addressing those three issues?
3. What are three practical things you can do to cultivate a heart for God? (See Mark 4:13-20; James 1:22.)

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