

The Inside Out Heart

By Dr. Dave Neale¹

...there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. And thus the name of our message today, *The Inside Out Heart*

I don't know about you but during covid I've put on some poundage and I've decided I need to get some of it off. I've repurposed Mark 7:15, *... there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but it sure can make you fat.*

There is an awful lot of space devoted to the subject of food in the Bible, not just the Old Testament, particularly in the first five books, the Torah, but also in the Prophets and of course the gospels and particularly in Paul – what you can eat and what you can't eat, because their relationship to food was an issue that differentiated the Jewish people from the Gentile population. Today we bump up against this practice of handwashing.²

Even though washing hands has been a major part of life in the pandemic, to think of this as a religious issue seems odd to us. There is a lot of cultural distance between the world we inhabit and the world of our biblical characters. So in the first part of my remarks today we need to bridge that gulf with some context before we can appreciate this strange saying of Jesus and what it means for us today.

So hang with me here for a few minutes and notice some things about the passage with me:

- ***Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him...*** (Mark 7:1) The exchange of views here is between Jesus and these Pharisee folks was a debate about food and some basic issues about what constituted the proper practice of the Jewish religion in respect to food.
- The Pharisees were ultra-pietists of the Jewish religion of the day. They were the most ardent, strict practioners in Judaism. They were widely admired obviously, but there weren't that many of them. Jeremias estimated that of a population of 600,000 Jews in Palestine at this time about 6,000 were practicing Pharisees. 1%

Eating food in a state of ritual purity, an admittedly complicated notion itself, was only required for priests serving in the temple in the Bible. Pharisees believed that anyone who wanted to show their extreme devotion to God would adopt that practice in daily life. This was part of ***the tradition of the elders*** but it wasn't in the Hebrew Bible.

¹ This morning we are back in the NT after quite a long run in the Old Testament. We were in Job for Epiphany, in the we did a mix of old and new in *The House of Listening* series for Lent. For the season following Easter we were in Acts for *Portraits of the First Followers*. Since May 30 we have been in Samuel in our *Journey of the Heart* series. Between now and Advent at the end of November we will stay in the NT with the Gospel of Mark, next week I'm in the book of James and the book of Hebrews.

² Notice that this section of Mark is about food. The Feeding of the 5000 in Mark immediately precedes the passage in chapter 6 and the Feeding of the 4000 immediately follows in chapter 8.

It was a difficult and onerous undertaking – not many people cared to take it on. This had implications for how you shopped for food, for tithing issues, and for the washing of the hands before eating.³

- **...they** [the Pharisees] **noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them...** and **(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders;... and (Mark 7:2-5) 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?”**
- Jesus wasn’t impressed with the Pharisaic approach on this one at all actually. When Jesus ways... **“You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!”** I think what he was saying that this handwashing business isn’t really at the heart of the message of the Hebrew scriptures, that in fact all the prophets warned us about excessive focus on rules, these external matters of religious practice, because if you aren’t careful you will quickly lose your way on the *journey of the heart*.

From the Text

I have three things I want to point out from our passage today that I think are really relevant to our own journey of the heart. Proximity. Praxis. Priorities.

The First Point is Proximity.

The Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13, **as it is written, This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.** (Mark 7:6) They have lost their way on the path of the heart.

Notice the word “far.” *Their hearts are far from me.* Far is a preposition noting proximity. Near is the opposite. So when we ask this question of ourselves, ‘Is my heart near to the heart of God?’ we aren’t just spouting pietistic slogans. *Isaiah* and then *Jesus* used this kind of language to help us understand where we are with God and how to walk with God.

Proximity to God is actually a thing. A spiritual thing.

I also think we can use our Journey of the Heart notion that the heart is the whole of our being, intellect, memories, emotions, desires (I’d love to have an Audi R8 but I don’t think that makes the list for nearness to God) and will.

Here is the important point. It isn’t where you *are in proximity to the heart of God*, but the *direction you are moving*. Because it isn’t a static thing; you never arrive, you only draw near. **Draw near to God and He will draw near to you** (James 4:8). It is all about the movement in life along this journey. That is why we call it a “journey.”

Losing weight is really daunting to me because I like to eat for fun, I love food. ‘I’m here and I should be way over there.’ It’s discouraging! But it is much healthier to ask ‘in which direction I am moving?’

³ The treatment of handwashing in the Mishnah tractate *Yada'im* (Hebrew for ‘Hands’) runs to six mindboggling pages. The practice of devotion is laudable and I don’t think Jesus was opposed to that really. But sometimes you can lose sight of the heart if you are too bound up in rules.

And that is the secret of a healthy journey of the heart. A bit of progress is good, a giant leap is unrealistic. There are two things to be avoided: *stagnation* and *moving away* rather than nearer to God.

If this “nearness to God” thing sounds a bit to experiential for you, that is fine, but could I just suggest that we reflect on this issue in the quiet times of the day occasionally. Let me suggest that we attend to the inner sense which is the weathervane of the wellness of the soul. What is my direction today and how can I encourage positive movement?

And the worst thing of all is self-delusion and the delusion of others. What the Book of Isaiah calls “lip service,” ***This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.***

This is what the Bible calls hypocrisy and it is where we don’t want to be found.

The Second Point is Praxis

And we acknowledge that proximity to God is thing, it then comes down to *how* we make movement happen. Which leads us to my second clever point. Praxis.

*Praxis*⁴ is how we create movement in the journey towards or away from God. Why don’t I just say ‘practice’? Because I think you’ll zone out on me! Praxis is that whole pattern of activity that can generate movement toward or away from God, that pattern which can actually generate nearness.

Just because the hypocrite has bad praxis doesn’t mean we don’t need to have good praxis. Now praxis is a big topic. What a growing Christian should actually be *doing* is important. And I try to touch on it each week.

Think of our praxis this way. What we do habitually, as a pattern of activity, expresses our Christian faith. Attending church is one example. You don’t come out of a sense of obligation or guilt, but as part of your pattern of behaviour that produces movement in your spiritual life.

Or, using your gifts in the community of faith to create a positive and healthy spiritual benefit. Attending a small group study...you do it to help you draw nearer to God.

Or your private study to nurture you mind? This is the fabric of your life.

Think of your praxis as your trade. You hone it. You attend to the skill of your practice. If it is your intellect you are honing it might mean not just coming to church to worship and hear the Word, but maybe you expand that by reading the texts for the week beforehand. Maybe you look again at the message again by downloading the text from our website on Monday, or maybe you rewatch and take some notes.

Or consider the meaning of texts like Romans 12:2, ...***be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.***

Or Col 3:2 ...***Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth...***

Or Phil 4:8 ***Finally, beloved, whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, think about these things.***

⁴ “practice as distinguished from theory, customs or habits of behaviour, the use of knowledge”)

And if you get discouraged I suggest you just read about the Paralympians while the games are on. They don't let obstacles stand in the way of practicing their sport! Asiya Mohammed is a double amputee, 16 years old and the first female rower from Kenya in the Tokyo Paralympics.

Why not just ask God to bring you nearer? When I was a boy I'd ask my Dad for a nickel and he pretended not to hear me. But then I'd ask him for a dollar he'd say, "I heard you the first time!" and give me a nickel.

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:11)

There is this beautiful passage in Sirach 38. It is an ode to the trades and crafts.

It begins with ***Honor the physicians for their services, for the Lord created them: for their gift of healing comes from the Most High, and they are rewarded by the King.*** (Sirach 38:1)

It talks about the one who plows, artists, the blacksmith, the potter. My favourite verse is: ***The wisdom of the scribe depends on the opportunity of leisure; only the one who has little business can become wise!*** (38:24).

Those who practice their trade or craft ...***maintain the fabric of the world, and their concern is for the exercise of their trade.*** (38:34)

The practice of their trade is their prayer. For us, what we do to draw near is a *part of the prayer of life for us!*

The Third is Priorities [I close with this point]

When Jesus got around to his point he said to the crowd ***Listen to me, all of you, and understand...*** (Mark 7:14). When he says that we don't hurry, we don't assume, we sit in the seat of the disciple.

...It isn't what goes into a person that defiles, it is what comes out of the heart... so attend to your nearness to God.

When I think about the number one practical issue that influences the direction of movement toward or away from God I think of community.

I've had long periods of nearness and long periods of being far from God in my life. I would say the number one factor in the wellness of my heart and my proximity to God was being in a community of faith. I'm not saying that you *can't* stay near to God alone, but I am saying that I think it is a hundred times easier to do it with people of like mind.

Find a community (I hope its here!) and get involved and walk this journey with others and draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

Amen