

The heart of the problem

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[0 : 00] Hello and good morning. My name is Benjamin Baru and I'm one of the deacons here in BMKAC and I'm honoured to be able to bring you a God's Word from Mark chapter 7, verse 1 to 23.

So let me pray first before we open the scripture. Fine in heaven, we thank you for your scriptures. We thank you for your word. I pray that you help me unpack your word faithfully and accurately, that it will edify us this morning for your glory. Amen.

Now, one of my favourite books to read when I was young was the Chronicles of Narnia. I read all seven books cover to cover multiple times, except for the last book, The Last Battle.

I only read that once. It was because I couldn't understand at the time what it was truly trying to say. It was just a depressing book to read at that time. Back then, I would read the books because of how magical it was, how fantastical the world of Narnia was.

But as I grew older, I started to appreciate the brilliant way C.S. Lewis took biblical truths and physical realities and crafted them and intertwined them into the realm of fantasy.

[1 : 19] The more popular book that you may know, and the first movie adaptation was The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. But today's sermon is related to the fifth book, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.

It's one of my favourite series, one of my favourite in the series. And in this story, we will quickly look at the storyline of one of the side characters called Eustace Clarence Scrub.

He's portrayed as an arrogant, whiny, selfish and self-centered donkey's behind, constantly complaining about the predicament he was in and blamed everyone else for his misfortune throughout the first half of the story.

Along the way, he finds a dragon's cave filled with gold, and he finds himself sleeping atop of the gold with greedy and dragonish thoughts in his heart.

As he awakens, he finds that he's turned into a dragon. Now it is Eustace and his transformation into a dragon. There will be an illustration to guide and assist us today in understanding the passage better.

[2 : 32] Now we will continue with Eustace and how he relates to this passage later in the sermon, but for now we will read verse 1 of chapter 7. Verse 1.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and 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, peaches and kettles. So the Pharisees and teachers of the law ask Jesus, why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating their food with defiled hands?

I'll just point out here that in some early manuscripts there is dining couches at the end of verse 4. So in the first few verses we get some contextual hints that are important for us to understand as we expound more into the text.

[3 : 39] Firstly, we have the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, characters that we are more or less familiar with. From the text, we understand that they have come from Jerusalem to mess with Jesus.

I'm sure when they have heard of a great teacher from Galilee, teaching and doing miracles, and gaining popularity that draws crowds from around the region to him, they thought that whatever he is doing has to be nibbed at the bud, wanting to take him down the best way they could think of.

They have to take him down publicly, to prove that they are the better teacher and Jesus is not. This time, however, they use a different method. This time they accuse his disciples.

Notice in verse 5, they say, It's your disciples that ate food with defiled hands. A sideways attack on Jesus through his disciples. But what were the Pharisees accusing the disciples of?

That brings us to point 2. The Pharisees accuse the disciples of eating with defiled hands and not following the tradition of the elders. In verse 5. Now people like us in this day and age could possibly agree with the Pharisees.

[4 : 53] And we could be shaking our heads at the disciples in disapproval, in fact. Come on, fellas. Wash your hands. Don't you know there's COVID? You have to be hygienic. You have to sanitize your hands.

And using outside clothes and lying on the dining couches? No way. Actually, the last one is what Irie, my wife, says to me when I get home. Go straight to wash.

Take bath now. Straight away. Don't lie. Don't sit on the couch. Such a Pharisee, right? You're just kidding. That's just a joke. But Irie and the Pharisee weren't talking about the same type of cleanliness.

If you've picked that up by now. It wasn't about dirt, bacteria or viruses. It was more about ceremonial washing. Or ritual cleanliness. Just to note at this moment that the Gospel of Mark's original audience were Gentile believers like you and I.

The parentheses or brackets in this chapter are commentaries written by Mark that might help us as Gentiles to fully understand the Jewish tradition of the time. If his audience were the Jews, this would have been obvious to them.

[6 : 03] He wouldn't have to write it. But to the Gentiles, they wouldn't have understood. Not understanding the significance of the accusation. Now to understand the mind of the Jew further, we also need to understand this tradition of elders in verse 3 and 5.

Now according to the Old Testament, generally only priests were required to wash before entering the tabernacle as prescribed in Exodus and Leviticus. Generally, this practice does not apply to everyday Jew.

But in the post-exilic era or after the exile, where the Jewish people encountered more and more Gentiles or Gentile culture, the idea of ritual cleanliness took a new significance in the lives of the Jewish people.

It became an identity where ritual cleanliness was a way of maintaining Jewish purity over and against the Gentile culture. Now you may be thinking, I don't remember the Jews having to wash so much in the Old Testament.

And you are right. These traditions of the elders were actually oral traditions that were later collected and codified into what they call now the Mishnah. So, tradition of the elders, oral traditions, and now the Mishnah.

[7 : 22] Pharisees of the day promoted the idea that Moses received two laws on Mount Sinai. The written Torah and the oral Mishnah. They believed the Torah was like a policy.

The written commandments God has decreed, but not always how it was to be fulfilled. The oral tradition, however, prescribed in infinite detail how the intent of the Torah ought to be fulfilled in actual circumstance.

So, the oral traditions were described as a fence of the Torah, protecting the commandments of the Torah. So, in an attempt to rigorously uphold the Torah, these oral traditions developed or was added for the Jewish people to maintain an idea of purity, of cleanliness against the defiled Gentiles, Samaritans, lepers, tax collectors, and even corpses.

So, to the Jew of the day, everything that might have come into contact with the defiled had to be washed. Cups, pitchers, couches, even themselves.

All richly washed, all in the pursuit of cleanliness. Now, what's so bad about this? On the surface, this might sound like a good thing.

[8 : 40] Maintain purity, maintain cleanliness. Trying to ensure that the commandments are kept. I'm sure God would be pleased, would He not? Isn't that somewhat what we do as Christians today?

We say we go to church. Remember, we teach the Ten Commandments. Or we try to be better people compared to perhaps other churches or other communities. But we will see what Jesus has to say later in verse 6 onwards.

In verse 6, He continues, He replied, In Jesus' rebuke, we get an idea of the problem of the Pharisees.

They had turned God's law into one that was legalistic in nature. Legalism is simply defined as the direct or indirect attachment of behaviors, disciplines, and practices to the belief in order to achieve salvation.

And right standing before God. Emphasizing a need to perform certain deeds in order to gain salvation. Two problem points are raised by Jesus as He quotes from Isaiah in verse 6 and 7.

[10:20] Firstly, we get the idea outwardly that the Pharisees make it look like they are honoring God. But inwardly, their intent and desire was not to please God.

In fact, it was far from God. They pay lip service to God, doing actions that seem pious, but their intentions were never to please God. But it was towards something else.

Later in Mark 12, 38-40, it gives us an example of the intentions of the Pharisees. Verse 38, From this example, we can see their intention is turned towards themselves, and they have become self-seeking.

It would seem that in the attempt to try to be ritually clean, they have missed the intention of God in giving the laws to His people. But then, what is God's intention to give to Old Testament law?

Now this question reminds me of law school and all of the subjects that I dislike the most. It is constitutional law. A major part of this subject is interpretation and implementation of the rights and laws contained in the Constitution.

[11:51] But in this case, we ought to look and find the intention of the author in writing the Old Testament laws. What was God's intention through the writing of Moses?

I think we can find the answer by looking at what Jesus says about the Old Testament. In Mark 12, 30-31, He summarizes the commandments into two of the greatest commandments, and I think many of us would know this.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment in the Old Testament was one, love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And the second commandment was, love your neighbor as yourself.

Then He said, there is no greater commandment than these. In the Gospel of Matthew, in the same incident, He says at the end, on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

It's Matthew 22, verse 40. That must mean that if a person understood and obeyed these two commandments, he would understand and fulfill the whole Old Testament was trying to teach.

[12:58] Everything in the Old Testament, when properly understood, aims basically to transform men and women into people who fervently love God and their neighbor or those around them.

The law was meant to transform His people to point them to Him. So here the Pharisees missed the point altogether. They missed the first great commandment, love your God with all your heart, soul, and strength.

God wanted His people to be wholly devoted to Him, but the teachers of the law were preoccupied with doing things that they thought only pleased God. They did not do the things out of love for God, but rather as a tradition, trying to get in right standing with God.

God longed to forgive His people. God longed for His people to come near, but their hearts were far from Him. And that was their first mistake.

The second commandment is connected to the second mistake of the Pharisees. In the second mistake, we can see how their traditions pointed to loving themselves or serving their own interests rather than the interests of others.

[14:10] Jesus said, they worship God in vain because their teachings are merely human rules. Now Jesus is asserting that they are hypocrites because the oral traditions that they kept were merely traditions that were written and made up by humans.

The traditions and the rules that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law promoted so dearly were contradicting God. The fence of the Torah that they describe the tradition of elders to be brings the full and literal meaning of the Malay idiom *harapkan pagar, pagar makan padi* or indirect translation with grammar, place hope on the fence and the fence eat your paddy.

They hope on the traditions to keep the Torah but they were led astray. They hope that their practices and deeds could lead them to salvation but they were led away from God.

Their traditions that they believe were described by Jesus as being an alternative to God's command in verse 7 and 8. It's either God's command or human tradition and again Jesus says that

they have put aside God's command and God's desires for what they want to do.

And Jesus gives an example of how they have let go of God's command in the following verses in verse 9 onwards. And in verse 9 he says, and he continued, you have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.

[15 : 39] For Moses said, honour 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 korban 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. Jesus accuses the Pharisees that their traditions nullify the word of God.

In this example, there is a practice where items or property that have been pledged to God or devoted to God are korban. Those things therefore cannot be used by any other people except for the purpose of God.

In this case, if someone had an extra house or tool or money that their parents and their parents did it, they will intentionally pledge or devote their property or money or item to God or to the temple as korban.

Thus denying their parents access to them. They can say, oh, you wanted to use the house? You wanted the money that I had? Well, I already pledged it to the temple and to God.

[16 : 52] So sorry about that. You can't have it. What a perfect selfish reason they would have had to protect their stuff. Right? Where is the honour and love for the parents?

Just like how the traditions led the Jewish people's heart away from loving God, it did not teach them to love others as well. And to top it off, this wasn't the only thing that was being practised.

At the end of verse 13, Jesus said, and you do many things like that. It is fair to surmise that there were other traditions that were being practised that nullified and contradicted the law of God.

And this must have been well known, this must have been a well known practice because as Jesus accuses the Pharisees, they couldn't respond to him. They must have been tongue tied as there was no further response as recorded by Mark.

Now this rebuke that Jesus brought in verse 6 and 7 was actually written by Isaiah to rebuke the Israelites of Isaiah's day. But Jesus uses it here in prophetic fashion to rebuke the Jews of his day, questioning the hearts of the Jewish leaders.

[18 : 00] In the same way, this rebuke holds true to us believers today. How are we living our Christian lives? Are we going through the motions of Christian living? Are we introducing unbiblical rules or practices to serve our own idea of Christianity?

If you are thinking that maybe by going to church or showing up to prayer meeting or home fellowship groups, meetings that we can get brownie points with God, or by going to church enough times, it will balance out enough the number of times that I have seen this week.

If you believe that, then you might be in the same boat as Pharisees, thinking that they can perform deeds and acts that will make them right with God. No, my friends, He doesn't want empty deeds.

He wants your heart. So we must ask ourselves, how is our posture towards God? How are we serving God? So far, I hope that I've painted out clearly the mind of the Jew and the approach that Pharisees are taking in regards to the traditions and the laws.

That in the mind of a Jew or a Pharisee, the deeds, actions and practices that I do are important if I want to be clean, if I want to be holy and set apart, or if I want to obtain salvation.

[19 : 17] It is the things that I do that make me clean. The washing that I do on the outside is going to purify me. With this in front of my mind, we read the rest of the verses. Verse 14, Again, Jesus called the crowd to him and said, Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.

Are you so dull? He asked. 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.

He went on, What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is 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. And Jesus goes through, goes on in verse 19, 14 to 19. It's tempting to straight away think that Jesus is talking about food.

[20 : 31] In verse 19, clearly Mark writes in brackets again, Jesus declared all foods clean. It's all about food, right? The short answer, it is and it isn't.

Jesus certifies all foods clean in this passage, but it's only later in Acts 10 that it actually dawns upon them of this truth. It's then they look back to this incident and go, Jesus actually talked about this all the way back then in Mark 7.

But if we were to only stop and think that it is only about food, you'd be missing a huge revelation that Jesus is alluding to. Yes, looking back at the passage, Jesus was talking how foods are clean, but he actually said something more mind-blowing, shocking, or downright heretical to the first century Jew of the day.

Only if they understood what he was truly saying. Verse 15, 18 and 19 reveals to us the true nature of the human heart. It puts whatever traditions and beliefs of the Jews of the day on top of its head. All throughout Israelite history, from Moses until the day Jesus said those words, the Jewish people held a belief that they needed to fulfill the laws to maintain ritually clean. They needed to wash, sacrifice animals, avoid the Gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors, and so on, to be holy and set apart.

[21 : 59] He reverses the order of the argument of the Pharisees. The original accusation whether his disciples were eating food with unclean hands meant that the defiled food would enter the body and thus defile their body making them unclean.

Instead, Jesus says that it is not what goes into him but what comes out from him that defiles him. Food or other things that enter the body don't enter the heart. It enters the stomach and exits the body.

It says in verse 19, Therefore, nothing consumed defiles the heart. However, it is from within that actually defiles them. Jesus lists all the wickedness in verse 23 that come from the inside and defiled person.

It is the heart that is where defilement and wickedness comes from. This is the nature of the human heart. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.

In the beginning, we talked about how God wants his people to love him with all their heart, soul and strength. He wants us, he wants our hearts to be wholly devoted to him but our hearts are corrupt that all sorts of evil desires and action comes from within and that no religious deed or tradition can cleanse and purify this wicked heart.

[23 : 19] How does God expect us with a defiled heart to give our hearts wholly to him? Verse 23 is the last verse of this passage that we are going through today. Is this the end of the story?

So this is where Eustace Clarence scrub comes back in. We will continue where we left off. Eustace continues the journey as a dragon slowly warming up to his companions.

Eustace soon discovers from embracing the reality that he was a dragon that it's not just that he had become a dragon but he was a dragon all along.

The physical transformation revealed to him the greedy and dragonish thoughts that had already been central in his heart. And when he realized that when he mourned that when he desired change his internal transformation began.

This is where the great lion Aslan comes in. He appeared in the middle of the night and called out to Eustace follow me. At this point Eustace was in pain and Aslan brought him to a pool that takes away all pain and suffering.

[24 : 28] But he tells Eustace that if you want to enter this pool you have to undress his dragonish self. So Eustace tries. He scratches his scales all around and after the poor boy has done all he can by scratching off his scales three times over it was to no avail.

It was then that Aslan's voice told him you will have to let me undress you. And with his sharp claws he tore the dragon skin from Eustace's body. The first tear he made was so deep that Eustace thought it had gone right into the heart.

Aslan then tossed Eustace into the pool of life feeling relief and without pain now transformed back into a boy. You will notice in this summary that Eustace is a portrayal of the human condition and Aslan portrays Jesus just as Eustace had dragonish thoughts and in fact had a dragonish heart all along so are we having sinful thoughts and a sinful heart all along.

Just as Eustace tried by his own strength to undress remove the scales by himself to enter the pool of life so do we have the tendency to try to work at our salvation or achieve salvation through doing our traditions or deeds.

Just as Eustace realized he needed help to undress when he failed so must we realize that we need help when it comes to the problem of the heart. We need something or someone to help us change.

[25 : 58] The solution to our heart problem lies with Jesus. Mark 7 was a preview of what was to come. Jesus was hinting to his disciples the nature of the heart and the reason he came down to earth for.

Jesus was pointing to his need to go to the cross. It is at the cross that we have hope that through Jesus our sinful hearts can be made new. In Ezekiel 11 verse 19 it promises to God's people when he returns I will give them one heart a new spirit I will put within them.

I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and I give them a heart of flesh. There is no question that as we are we need a new heart. We need the work of the spirit on our hearts.

We know God can give us a heart but friends there is a call to action for us in order for God to work in us. We have to humble ourselves repent and come to him.

The plea in Ezekiel 18 verse 19 says rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die people of Israel?

[27 : 10] And in Romans 10 9 to 10 it says because you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and catch this church and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.

For with the heart one believes and is justified and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. God wants you and pleads with you to come and get a new heart as we can read from Romans.

It shows the difference God can make on our hearts. There is a change that happens only by God's grace and it works on our heart. In the beginning we learn and know that it is the heart that we are defiled.

That it's from our heart all weakness and sin stems. Yet in Christ, in confessing that Jesus is Lord and believing with our hearts, we are saved and justified. It is the heart that we are sinful but it is by the same heart we can be saved through the work of Jesus on the cross.

So as I close today's sermon, let's reflect on our lives for a moment. How are we going about our lives? What is our attitude towards the church and to ministry?

[28 : 26] Are we choosing to serve God or not? And if not, why not? Are we serving or going to church just to carry through the motions or do we actually want to please God?

Are our hearts truly devoted to Him? Perhaps you realise your heart isn't where it should be. Or perhaps it's your first time hearing how wicked the heart can be.

If that is you, know that God loves you still. Know that He desires your heart. In Ezekiel 18, He pleads to His people to get a new heart and a new spirit. And He laments, why would you die people of Israel?

Repent and confess that He is Lord and He promises He promises to give you a new heart and a new spirit. He will take that heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. He will turn that dragon back into a boy again.

That's the hope we have in Jesus Christ. That is the answer to Mark 7 and the problem of the heart. Now realise the same call from Aslan to Eustace in the day of night is the same call of Jesus to us all.

[29 : 36] He calls us to follow me. Why don't we follow him today? Let me close in prayer. Father in heaven, we thank you for your love that you poured on to us through your son Jesus on the cross.

We thank you that in our sinful state, even when we have gone too far from you, even when we have rebelled against you, you are still there calling us to come back to you.

We know we are sinful and we need a saviour. We are assured by your promise that if we come to you in repentance and believe that our hearts will be renewed.

We thank you for this promise Lord and we pray that you help us to follow you and to walk with us through this journey of life.