

Going Through the Motions

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Preacher: Calum Cameron

[0 : 0 0] So for a brief time this morning, we're going to be looking at the last passory read in the Bible there from Mark chapter 7. So if you have a Bible with you and you want to follow along, that was on page 842, but we'll also have some of the verses up on the screens. I want to just begin this morning by asking us just to think about a question. I wonder how much time in your week, if you add it up, you spend thinking or worrying about what other people think about you. I read a study recently online that shows that the average human being spends an alarming amount of our week worrying and obsessing over how we're received by other people. We spend our time fretting and just the opinions of others just know at us. Maybe some people worry about what clothes they're going to wear in the morning, what people will think of them. Maybe at work we worry about our boss or our colleagues and what they think of our performance. Or maybe you worry at church that what other people think about you as a Christian. Well this morning these verses we read in Mark chapter 7, we see Jesus engaging and interacting with this group of people called the Pharisees. Now the Pharisees were obsessed with their religious image that they presented to the people around them. They were obsessed with the way that other people saw them. And I want to kind of break this chapter down and look at under two brief points this morning. First of all, I want to think about the way that we are seen by others and then secondly the way we are seen by God. So first of all, the way we are seen by others. When you read the Bible and when you read the New Testament you see something that Jesus does time and time again as he exposes the motives and the desires of the human heart. And when he's engaging with these Pharisees what often happens is you see the same heart motive pop up time and time again. And I think if we read for context that's pretty helpful. Matthew 23 verse 5, he says about these Pharisees, everything they do is done for people to see. They love the place of honor at the banquets, the most important seats in the synagogues. They love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called rabbi by others. We see the same thing in chapter 6. He says these are people who practice their righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and street corners to be seen by others. And then last one Luke chapter 18 and verse 9, there's some people who are confident in their own righteousness, they're looking down on everyone else. Jesus tells this parable, two men go up to a temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stands by himself and prays, God I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all

I get. In other words, look how great I am. Look how morally and spiritually together I've got my life. So the desire that Jesus is exposing in these chapters time and time again is that everyone else will see how great you are.

So as we come to this engagement in Mark 7 with Jesus and the Pharisees, it's helpful to have that context in mind. Let's read the first few verses again. These Pharisees have gathered to him with some of the scribes who've come from Jerusalem. They see that some of his disciples are eating with hands that aren't washed, that were defiled. And the Pharisees and the scribes ask him, why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but they eat with unwashed hands? So what exactly is going on here in this passage?

What exactly is the problem? Why are the Pharisees making such a big deal about Jesus' disciples not washing their hands? It makes me think of my childhood growing up would be out playing in the garden, we get called in for dinner, we sit on the table and one of my brothers would inevitably yell, ma'am, Calendon, wash his hands. Let's know what's going on here in Mark 7. This is not about hygiene. The Pharisees are not concerned that Jesus' disciples are going to get germs. This is about ritual purity. For the Jews, the concept of being clean, ritually clean, was extremely important

because God is so holy and so righteous and so perfect and so opposed to anything tainted by sin and by evil that for us to come into His presence, we have to be clean. And in the Old Testament, there was various ways they did that through the sacrifices and through the priesthood and so on and so forth. But by the time Jesus is coming, by the time He's interacting with these Pharisees here, all of this extra tradition had evolved around the Old Testament. The Pharisees had pages and pages of lists of rules and regulations of things you could do or you couldn't do things you should wash before you eat. We have in this passage an example in verse 4.

There are many other traditions that the Observer of Jesus says, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches. And it all seems a little bit OCD. But the point is that the Pharisees want to be clean and they see Jesus' disciples here, they're just eating with unwashed hands and it's not their tradition. And I wonder what you think of when you hear the word tradition. Maybe you think of candles and incense and saints and all that kind of stuff. Or maybe you think of someone who's so stubbornly set in their ways that they refuse to change because we've always done it this way. But it's important I think for us to recognize first of all that tradition is not necessarily a bad thing.

[5 : 22] Tradition itself can actually be good. Even here at St. Columbus, we have a whole host of traditions. We tend to stand up to sing. We sing our hymns, accompany to music. We sing our psalms, a capella. We generally have two services on a Sunday and they tend to be at the same time.

Tradition itself is fine. The problem is that tradition can be twisted and elevated to the point that it actually undermines what the Bible says. And religious tradition especially can be so full of rules and burdens and regulations that it becomes a real problem. This is how Jesus responds in verse 6. He says to them, Well did Isaiah prophesy, you hypocrites, as it is written, this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men. So Jesus really doesn't hold back here in Mark 7. He really says it as it is. He calls them out for what they are. He calls them hypocrites. These are guys in their time who were looked up to as their religious greats, the conservatives of their day, the guys who are morally and spiritually excellent. But Jesus sees through their outward appearance. He sees that they are so focused on the approval and the recognition and the affirmation of other people that in reality their hearts are a million miles away from God. Their worship is empty. They're distant.

They're going through the motions of religion, but they lack that personal relationship with God. And he goes on to continue to expose another flaw in the Pharisees' hearts. He says, You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition. For Moses said honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die. But you say, if a man tells his father or mother whatever you've gained from me as Corban that is given to God, then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you've handed down and many such things you do. So what's this whole Corban thing about? It maybe sounds like somewhere you'd go on holiday. This is the only place in the Bible the word appears. But Corban is really, it is an oath that the Pharisees allowed people to take that meant that anything that you give is given to God and can only be used for that explicit purpose. But you see the fifth commandment to honor your father or mother is something that the people of God were meant to take really seriously. And in those days in particular there's no state care for the elderly, there's no pension system. So what would happen is you'd be expected to bear the financial responsibility for your parents who raised you and cared for you.

[8 : 07] But the way people, somebody's got around this was with this Corban oath. They would say this money is set aside for God so it's not going to your parents. And the Pharisees were really exploiting their tradition to undermine the whole point of the fifth commandment and the love and the compassion and the mercy which is supposed to underlie it. So what does all of this mean? What's Jesus really getting at here? Well, he's saying the Pharisees and their tradition is all show and no substance. He's saying that they have mastered an external facade, an appearance that other people see but that God sees through. There are people who honor God with their lips but in reality their heart is far from Him.

You see, the gospel of Jesus Christ is so radically different. It's not about rules and regulations. It's not about how well you follow a tradition or how well you perform morally or spiritually. John Calvin,

the French theologian from the time of the Reformation, he put it really well. If you've got a bulletin you'll find a reflection on the inside and he says this, it's in there. The gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue but of life.

It cannot be grasped by reason and memory only but is fully understood only when it possesses the whole soul and penetrates to the inner recesses of our hearts.

So the Pharisees were guys who had tremendous amounts of Bible knowledge. They had lots of knowledge up in their heads. They'd memorized a good chunk of the Scriptures, most of them. They put on a great show of public piety but it had not grasped their hearts. It had not penetrated to the inner recesses of their being. And I think as we reflect on this chapter together and we think about the Pharisees, so often I think they can be a mirror into our own hearts this morning. Maybe we need to ask ourselves, where is our heart when we worship God? Is it distant? Are we simply going through the motions and turning up to the church every Sunday and singing the songs and listening to God's word? Do we then clock off afterwards and our hearts go back to being a million miles away? Are we maybe a bit like the Pharisees in the sense that we get so absorbed with what other people think about us that that's more important than what God sees? Are we someone who worships God with our lips while our heart is far from Him? I think it's rare in the Christian life that we find ourselves a million miles away from God all of a sudden. It's often a slow process.

But it's dangerous. A distant heart gradually over time can harden and harden and harden and we can become almost immune to the call to repent and come back to Jesus. Just as an example, I've been driving my car on Denver for a few years now and last year I began to get one of those, you know, the orange lights that come on in your dashboard indicating that there was a problem. What I did was the natural response. I ignored it and hoped it would go away because my MOT was in two months. I was driving around with this orange light.

[11:07] Every time I started the engine, this orange light, I felt a twinge of guilt thinking I should really go and get that sorted. But it was fine. The car seemed to be no problems. Then a couple of months later, just before it was due for my MOT, I started the engine one day and all this black smoke started coming out of the hood and this horrible burning smell. I was thinking, okay, that's really not good. So I took it into the garage and what would have initially been quite a cheap and a simple, easy fix ended up being quite an insidious and dangerous leak in my coolant system. And it certainly taught me a lesson of looking after my car. But more importantly, I think, and it's an imperfect illustration, but perhaps a reminder that we can so easily just choose to ignore that spiritual warning light in our lives. We can be so aware that, you know, we know we're far from God. We know our hearts are distant, but we think, well, maybe we'll sort ourselves out later. We go around acting as if everything's totally fine. Maybe we put on a show for the people around us at church, but in reality, our hearts are far from God. But having said that, that's not to say that we're a hypocrite simply because we're struggling. Struggling is a natural part of the Christian life. Kevin DeYoung put it like this. He said that the hypocrite is not the Christian who struggles against sin, fights against temptation and keeps doing what is right even on our worst days. The hypocrite is the Christian who uses the veneer of public virtue to cover the rot of private vice. He's the man living a double life.

She's the woman fooling her friends because she has church clothes. The student who proudly answers the questions in the student group and then proudly rumps through immorality throughout the rest of the week. He says, the sin of hypocrisy is not that we're more messed up than we seem. That's true for all of us. The sin is in using the appearance of goodness to cloak the deeds of evil. The sin is in thinking that what others think you are matters a great deal more than whom God knows you to be.

So that leads us to think on to our second point. We've looked to what Mark 7 teaches us about the way that other people see us. And I think second, it's helpful to think about the way that God sees us. You see, these Pharisees demonstrate to us so clear that it's possible to have mastered the outward appearance, the power that everyone else can see but still be an absolute mess on the inside. In Matthew 23, Jesus went on to say to the Pharisees, you are like whitewashed tombs. Outwardly, you appear beautiful, but within you are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So also, you appear outwardly righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

I think the point time and time again that Jesus is making, that you can maybe fool the people around you, but you can never fool God. God sees through our outward appearance.

So as we go on to read in Mark 7 and from verse 14, it's so clear that it's not about the external stuff. That's not what determines whether or not we are clean before God, whether or not our hearts are in the right with God. The things we do or say are performance. He says, verse 14, He called the people to Him again and said to them, hear me all of you and understand. There is nothing outside a person that by going into Him can defile Him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile. And when He entered the house and left the people, His disciples asked Him about this parable, and He said to them, are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile since it enters the heart, not the heart, but the stomach and is expelled? And as He declared, all foods clean.

[14 : 51] So I'm the key point here. Jesus is not saying you can just eat whatever you like. The key point really is that you cannot make yourself right with God by following a set of rules or traditions. In complete contrast with the Pharisees, Jesus is saying that what really matters is what we are like on the inside. As human beings, we make judgments based on what we see, what we can observe, what people are like. But God sees our hearts exactly for what they are. For example, when God chooses David as king in the Old Testament in 1 Samuel, it says, there the Lord sees not as human beings see. Human beings look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.

Sam 1-3-9 describes God as a God who knows us, who sees us through and through. He knows when we sit and when we rise. He knows our thoughts from afar. He discerns my going out and my lying down. He is familiar with all our ways. Before a word is on our tongue, God knows it completely. So again, the point is whatever image of ourselves we might try and present to others, God sees through. He sees all of our thoughts. He sees all of our desires and our impulses and our heart cravings and our longings. He sees every angry or hateful outburst. He sees every time our hearts swell with pride or they burn with jealousy.

Now look at the way he describes the human heart here in verse 21. Again, he does not hold back, for from within, out of the hearts of human beings come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All of these evil things come from within and defile a person. You see, the human heart is capable of astonishing evil. Maybe today we're sitting here and we don't feel particularly evil. We don't feel like we're genocidal. We don't feel like we do anything particularly horrific. I've recently been reading a book called Man is Wolf to Man and it's a story of the Russian Gulags and it's just, it's absolutely mind bending the things that human beings are capable of doing to one another. Sigmund Freud, a man maybe not famous for his great theology, but he once said, the phrase man is wolf to man. Who in the face of all his experience of life and of human history will have the courage to dispute that ascitation? The human heart is capable of incredible evil. But also in our own experience, in our lives today, I doubt we have any war criminals or people who've been involved in the Gulag system here in St. C's, but we all have darkness in our hearts.

Jesus said that anyone who's hated another person is a murderer. Anyone who's gazed a second too long lustfully at another person is an adulterer. We know we all have our own struggles with pride or with anger or with jealousy or the specific sins that trouble our hearts. The question then is when we approach something like Mark 7 and we read this diagnosis of the human condition, how can we possibly come to God and say we are clean? How can we possibly come to God and be right with him? How can I come to a God who is so holy and so perfect and so righteous, who cannot tolerate any sin and call him father? This is the problem that Mark 7 sets up for us. And the natural response is the response of the Pharisees, right? It's legalism. It's something that we have to earn, something that we have to somehow obtain. We have to do stuff. We have to perform. A legalistic heart focuses in on our performance and what we do or what we fail to do. A legalistic heart is quick to focus on the shortcomings and the failings of others. The gospel message that Jesus presents to us is that we can never make ourselves clean. We can never do enough to bridge that gap between our sinful hearts and a holy and righteous God. If Mark 7 makes one thing clear, if there's one point to take away from these verses, it's that our hearts desperately need change. The answer can never be that we just have to try harder. We just have to roll our sleeves up and somehow make ourselves better. That's moralism. The answer is found in the cross, in what Jesus would go on to experience. Through the cross, the

[19 : 48] Bible tells us we can be given a new heart, a changed heart, a clean heart. So we read some of these examples from this list, the lust, the pride, the envy, the hate, the sensuality, the bitterness, all of these things that go through our hearts. Through Christ and what He's done on the

cross are washed away. So when God sees us, He doesn't see these things. He sees the perfect, innocent righteousness of Christ. So we come before God today as His children, as those who are clean, as those who don't need to do anything to earn that. Look at what God promises His people in Ezekiel 36. He says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put in you.

I will move from your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And do you see the key thing with the verbs here in this passage? Look who's performing the action. It's God.

He will cleanse you. He will give you a clean heart. It's almost unbelievable for us, but God takes us as we are, as broken and flawed and sinful people. He takes us as we are.

There's no prerequisite. There's no level or moral standard that we somehow first have to reach. You'll probably know the famous quote from Tim Keller. He says that God sees us as we are. He accepts us as we are. He even loves us as we are. But by His grace, He does not leave us as we are. He changes us. He gives us a new heart. I think one of the problems we have as Christians sometimes though is not that we don't know this. We know this stuff. But we have this kind of like spiritual amnesia. We sometimes tend to forget who we are in Christ. We somehow withdraw into ourselves and tell ourselves that we're a failure or that we're not living up to a standard.

Sinclair Ferguson said that failure to deal with the presence of sin can often be traced back to this kind of spiritual amnesia, to forgetting our new, true, real identity. As a believer, I am someone who's been delivered from the dominion of sin and darkness and who therefore is free and motivated to fight against the remnants of sin in my heart. You must know, rest, and think through and act upon your new identity if you're a believer you are in Christ. So we need to remember who we are. We need to remember what God has done in our hearts and in our lives. I think as we've been thinking about in Mark 7 about the kind of inward, outward, and appearances, I think integrity is one of the greatest qualities we can show as a Christian. We want to be people whose insides and outsides match, people who are consistent in what we say and what we do in public and behind closed doors. You see, I think in our witness to our world and to our city and to the people around us, I think nothing is more damaging or off-putting than a hypocrite. To see someone who says one thing but in reality lives in a totally different way. That's always going to be a huge challenge to us as Christians. We recognize it is a lifelong struggle and a battle. The Christian life involves a continual call to repent and to come back to Christ and to confess how much we need Him. So we have to remember who we are. Jonathan Edwards said that a Christian who is stuck wallowing in sin is like a butterfly crawling miserably along a branch as if it's still a caterpillar. You see, a butterfly has gone through an incredible transformation.

[23 : 43] It's a new creature. So for it to come out if it's cocoon and to continue to live and act as if it's still a caterpillar is absurd. And in much the same way as Christians, we can completely forget the fact that we're new creatures. We're drawn back to the same old life. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, 17, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation.

The old has passed away, behold, the new has come. Today, if you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you are a child of God. You have a new heart. He equips you to live a new life.

And we need to remind ourselves what God sees when He looks at us. What God sees is the perfect spotless innocence of Christ in place of our unrighteousness and failings and faults.

So we want to pray that He will give us a heart and a desire to obey Him and love Him and live for Him. So we ask ourselves as we close this morning, how is your heart? When you worship God with God's people, where are you? Are you distant? Are you far away? Maybe the big question that drives you and motivates you in life is what will they think? What will the people around me think? Jesus reminds us in Mark 7, the most important question we have to grapple with is when God looks at you, what does He see? If your trust is in Christ this morning, He sees a heart that's shaped by grace, grace that's free and undeserved and unmerited. We pray and trust that He'll enable our hearts to turn to Him, to trust in Him and to rest in Him and you this morning. Let's pray together.

Oh, Lord God and loving Father, we just want to thank you and praise you for all that you've done for us through Jesus Christ. We thank you that you are a God who changes hearts.

[25 : 44] You take hearts of stone and you give us hearts of flesh. Lord, we thank you for the way that you have dealt with our darkness. We thank you for the way that you have taken all of our sin and all of our inconsistency and all of our failings and you have paid the penalty in full. Father, we

pray that you would help us this morning to trust again in the work of Jesus Christ. Lord, to be reminded of how amazing you are, for a wonderful Savior you have been. Father, we pray that you would equip our hearts to love you more, to love each other more and Father, in all we do this week, to do all we do to your glory, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.