**Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 The Pharisees and some of the experts in the law came from Jerusalem and gathered around Jesus. 2They saw some of his disciples eating bread with unclean (that is, unwashed) hands. 3In fact, the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they scrub their hands with a fist, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions they adhere to, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, kettles, and dining couches. 5The Pharisees and the experts in the law asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders? Instead they eat bread with unclean hands.” 6He answered them, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it is written: These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. 7They worship me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were doctrines. 8“You abandon God’s commandment but hold to human tradition like the washing of pitchers and cups, and you do many other such things.” … 14He called the crowd to him again and said, “Everyone, listen to me and understand. 15There is nothing outside of a man that can make him unclean by going into him. But the things that come out of a man are what make a man unclean. 16If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!” … 21In fact, from within, out of people’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, 22adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, slander, arrogance, and foolishness. 23All these evil things proceed from within and make a person unclean.”**

Dirty Hands, Clean Heart

Clean hands are important. We expect anyone who is touching our food to have cleaned their hands. When it isn’t convenient to use a sink with nearby soap, hand sanitizer is the way to go. Clean hands are so important employers have policies about washing hands. Yet, who can tell you if your hands really are clean? Scientists, doctors, teachers, parents? Are your hands clean…enough? Too clean? There are those that argue we’ve so sanitized our world including our hands that each generation grows up less healthy than the previous, more susceptible. All of this pales in importance though when we compare it to the question of a clean heart.

Clean hands are important, but how important are they? Important enough that if you were talking with Jesus that would be the topic you would want to discuss? It might sound odd but that was exactly what happened. Jesus was having all kind of people talk to him. **The Pharisees and some of the experts in the law came from Jerusalem and gathered around Jesus. 2They saw some of his disciples eating bread with unclean (that is, unwashed) hands…5The Pharisees and the experts in the law asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders? Instead they eat bread with unclean hands.”**

If you had the opportunity for a private audience with Jesus, would you argue about the proper way to wash before a meal? It may even be that this was not a matter of the disciples washing their hands at all, but of not washing their hands according to the Pharisees’ standards. They seemed to have completely lost sight of what really matters before God. The way they ask their question suggests the root of the problem is that they’ve begun to put human concerns before and above what’s important in God’s eyes. Our initial sympathy with the Pharisees’ concern over clean hands at the table goes right away when we begin to see the real problem in all its seriousness.

Passing the Pharisee hand inspection was easy to do. Their hand washing law was something like this: Before one ate, one must pour 1 1/2 egg-shells of water over his hands, but not just in any manner, but in this prescribed manner. He must hold the hands with the finger-tips upwards and pour the water over them until it ran down his writs; he must then cleanse the palm of each hand with the fist of the other; he must then hold the hands with the fingertips pointing downwards and pour water on them from the wrists downwards so that ran off at the fingertips. This was not a matter of hygiene; it was a matter of ritual, even if the hands were spotless it must be done. From them just going through the right actions was the most important.

Our Lord reminds them it was more than just the action but checking what was behind the action Centuries before through Isaiah, the Lord tried to teach them to check for true cleanness by considering the heart: **These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. 7They worship me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were doctrines.**

We make the same mistake they were making if we miss the very important way Jesus introduces this quote from Isaiah. **Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites.** Right after this, Jesus speaks of the Commandments God gave through Moses and how these ancient words of God should be shaping the lives and thoughts of his hearers. The Pharisees are more concerned about whether people’s hands were washed in a certain way than whether their bodies have been cleansed of sin by the words of Jesus. They aren’t concerned about their hearts being filled with the peace Jesus proclaims. That’s exactly the sort of thing that happens when we stop asking what’s important to God.

You’ve all heard the expression “lip service,” and you probably know what it means. Did you know the expression was started by this passage and the passage from Isaiah? No one is impressed by outward professions that are completely unsupported by attitudes and actions. Jesus’ words may suggest looking at the phrase differently. We might better think of close lips and distant hearts. Have you ever had the uncomfortable or even infuriating experience of someone whom you know inwardly opposes you greeting warmly—even with a handshake or embrace? You recognize the hypocrisy.

If Isaiah’s words are prophesied about us, and if Jesus’ warning speaks to us, we had better examine our own lip and hearts and heads and hands to see how we’re doing. How have we lost sight of what’s really important? What traditions of men, what traditions of our own, have we let crowd out God’s Word from its proper place as the Word that demands our total obedience? In what ways have we ceased to care about the hearts of those around us and instead just examined the cleanness of their hands?

The sin of the Pharisees’ approach is shown in the behavior that results. Replacing God’s Word with man’s, listening to human traditions that are followed at the cost of the honor due God’s Word, results in a life lived only for self. When our hearts are filled with self and far from God, even those dearest to us will suffer the consequences. Instead of gratitude, honor, obedience, and love toward those who have endured pain and deprivation to give us life, we look for excuses and loopholes so that we can be free of the burden of caring.

Example: the tradition of going to church. It’s a great and valuable tradition. Yet, it doesn’t work as the end all. When children are forced to go to church along with forced to study God’s Word without adults being active with them, they rebel against the hypocrisy they see. When all the hear is how important is it to be a Christian and to go to church but how that doesn’t play out to make the lives of the adults around them different from the other adults they see in the world, Christian faith becomes something of little perceived value. And something only to get involved with when it will make your life easier or will only work out to your personal benefit.

In one of the verses our lesson skips Jesus says *You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. You do many things like that* (v. 13)*.* He saying that some of the problems you see in how people connect with God’s Word are caused by what you have been holding dear. The Pharisees way of washing hands it just one. And shows are vast difference between what is Godly and what had become sinful. Contrast the image of marriage and the definitions of marriage in our world today. The picture of marriage Paul gives us in Ephesians 5 is just one more example. It’s a long list. Our hands may be clean, but out hearts are filthy.

Human traditions may set standards for outward cleanness, but they can never make us clean within. Jesus points out the true source of the Pharisees’ uncleanness because he wants to make them clean. This is clearly demonstrated in the casting out of the unclean spirit and the compassion Jesus shows to the crowds in the accounts that follow. Jesus draw our attention away from human traditions, which cannot save us, to focus on God’s Word, which can. God’s words spoken to us and for us expose the dirt we’ve been hiding in the hope no one would see, the dirt that gets in our eyes and blinds us to the needs of those around us, the dirt that clogs our hearts and shuts them down, the dirt that kills. The point of all this is not so God can say, “Look you’re dirty,” rather our Lord calls us from human tradition to God’s Word and his priorities and letting his voice declare us clean so that he can say, by his death on the cross, “Come to me, and I will make you clean.” Amen.

Points to consider as an individual or with a small group:

* What is a tradition you value?
* Explain the value of the tradition.
* Does the tradition have the same value for others? Explain.
* Traditions are good when they…