

Creekside Community Church  
Kingdom or Culture? The Gospel of Mark  
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Jeff Bruce, Associate Pastor

### Heart Failure: Mark 7:1-23

Well good morning and happy Valentine's Day. Today's passage is all about the heart. And I suppose that's fitting, since Valentine's is the ultimate "*heart*" holiday, right? But I'm just going to apologize in advance; because this may be the most unsentimental, unromantic passage about the heart in the entire Bible.

Our son Jake is 3. So Kshelle and I are in the "*constantly-preventing-your-kid-from-ingesting-gross-things*" stage of parenting. A few days ago, we were at a fast-food restaurant. And Jake spilled chocolate milk all over our table. But he didn't pout about it. No, he just bent down, stuck out his tongue, and started to lap the milk off the table, like *a dog*. It was gross. I gagged. And then I stopped him. And I said, "*Jake, that's gross. Don't do that.*" And clearly, he took my little lecture to heart; because 30 minutes later, we're at home. I put Jake in the bath. I go to grab something. And then our daughter Addie yells out, "*Mom! Dad! Jake is drinking bath water! Jake is drinking bath water!*" And then she adds, "*Jake, it's like you're drinking your bodily fluids!*" Ok, she didn't quite say *that*; it's a slight paraphrase. But you know, she has a point. That's pretty gross. But here's the thing; Jake doesn't care. In fact, he *loves* it. When he sees that look of disgust on our faces, he comes alive inside.

We're constantly trying to keep our kids from contamination. That's like the first 5 years of parenting, right? Because look; the world is full of things that can poison them. But according to Jesus, there's a disease that we *can't* keep our kids from contracting. They already have it. In fact, everyone does. Humanity has a spiritual infection, called sin. And the disease within them is far worse than any of the diseases outside them.

We've been making our way through the Gospel of Mark in a series entitled *Kingdom or Culture?* Jesus shows us what life in God's kingdom looks like. And He continually contrasts this kingdom with the culture of first century Israel. Over and over we hear him say, in effect, "*Here's what you think; but here's what God thinks.*" And that's why Jesus finds Himself in constant conflict with his culture. According to the Bible, we'll either be shaped by our culture, or by God's kingdom. And so we're looking at how Jesus confronted his own culture, and how he confronts ours.

Today, we're looking at Jesus' diagnosis of the human condition. In Jesus' day, people wanted to purify humanity from the outside-in; to create a pure environment, in order to create pure people. And today people, still long for purity; for an environment free from harmful ideas, and foods, and people. Jesus affirms our desire for purity. But he also confronts us. He says our problem doesn't begin out there. It begins in here. Evil originates in the deepest

part of us. So we need a solution that doesn't just change our environment, but that changes *us* at the very core of who we are. And any other kind of solution is no solution at all.

**I. How Jesus Confronted His Culture:** Let's look at how Jesus confronted his culture. If you have a Bible, you can turn to Mark 7. Mark says, "*And the Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered together around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed.*" (vv. 1-2) Jesus and his disciples sit down to eat. But the Pharisees interrupt their meal. The tension between Jesus and these religious leaders has been escalating. And now, the Pharisees are looking for an accusation against Jesus; something that will invalidate his message, and his ministry. And this time, the Pharisees bring back-up. They come with "*scribes*" from Jerusalem. The scribes were brilliant biblical scholars. So the Pharisees bring this theological SWAT team. And all of these religious elites notice that Jesus' followers are eating with unwashed hands. And that seems like a weird thing to notice, doesn't it? Why would that attract their attention?

Well, Mark tells us why. He says, "*(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; <sup>4</sup> 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.)*" (vv. 3-4) Mark wrote his gospel to non-Jews; to people who were unfamiliar with Jewish culture. So he provides some cultural context. The Jews were preoccupied with ritual purity. They were constantly cleansing things, because they wanted to follow, "*the tradition of the elders.*" Israel's legal experts tried to apply God's law to every imaginable scenario. And they created guidelines for obeying God's commands. And over time, these rules were codified. And this legal tradition became the conventional wisdom of the day. So if you wanted to follow God, you followed this tradition.

The religious leaders were concerned about cleanliness. And this stemmed from their reading of the Old Testament. God's law required people to cleanse themselves whenever they touched an unclean thing. And the priests – the people who served in God's temple – had the most stringent purity requirements of all. Each priest had to undergo a ritual cleansing before serving in God's presence. All of these cleansings served as visual aids.<sup>1</sup> They reminded the people that sin defiled them. And, thus they needed to be cleansed in order to dwell in God's pure and holy presence. And the Pharisees took this to heart. They wanted to be close with God. So they created laws to protect themselves from defilement. In effect, they tried to make their surrounding environment like the temple. They wanted to live as priests in God's presence. So for the Pharisees, cleanliness *really* was next to godliness.

And thus, they're troubled by Jesus and his disciples, because they don't seem very concerned about cleanliness. So they ask Jesus a question: "*And the Pharisees and the scribes*

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Dutton, 2011); 71.

asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" (v. 5) In other words, "Jesus, why doesn't your group care about purity as much as we do?"

Now Jesus eventually answers their question. But first, he turns the tables on them. And he exposes their hypocrisy: "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. <sup>7</sup> 'But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'<sup>8</sup> "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." (vv. 7-8)

Jesus says the Pharisees only pretend to care about purity. Their hands are pure, but their hearts are impure. Jesus uses the words of Isaiah to describe the Pharisees' condition. In Isaiah's day, God's people worshipped false gods. But they continued to give God lip service. They trusted in an external form of religion. And they listened to false teachers who said, "just go through the motions; just perform the rituals; and you'll be acceptable to God." Jesus says to the Pharisees, "that's you. You're doing exact same thing. You idolize your traditions. You think they please God. But in reality, you love traditions more than God and his word." "He was also saying to them, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition." (v. 9) The Pharisees, "nicely" set aside God's word. That word means, "nicely" means "beautiful." Jesus is being sarcastic. He's saying, "you do a beautiful job of disobeying God. You make disobedience look so pretty; so pious." Now, that's a harsh accusation.

But Jesus backs it up with an example. "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death';<sup>11</sup> but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by is Corban (that is to say, given to God),'<sup>12</sup> you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother;<sup>13</sup> thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." (vv. 10-12) Jesus thinks the Pharisees love their traditions more than God's word. And he uses the legal concept of "Corban" to illustrate his point. In Jesus' day, a person could declare something was "Corban"; which meant it was dedicated to God. And this declaration was legally binding. Once a person said a thing was "Corban," it *had* to be offered to God. It couldn't be used for other purposes. However, the person didn't *have* to immediately surrender possession of the thing. The vow just had to be fulfilled at some point. Now, the Bible has some strong things to say about vows. In Numbers 30:2, God says that, "if someone takes an oath, he shall not violate his word." And the Pharisees took this to heart. And so they created guidelines for keeping oaths. And they demanded that vows be kept, even if the vows themselves were evil! And this created some interesting legal loopholes. Apparently, some people were telling their parents, "whatever I would have given to you, I now give to God" In other words, they were refusing to provide for their parents' financial needs. And the Pharisees enabled this kind of behavior. They said, "well, you made the vow. You can't break it." But Jesus says, "you're enabling people to disobey God." God says, "honor

*your father and mother.*" That's the *fifth* commandment. And that commandment had clear financial implications. To honor your parents meant that you provided for their needs, especially when they were old. And God took this commandment seriously. In fact, if someone renounced this responsibility, they could be executed. But the Pharisees allowed people to circumvent God's law out of reverence for their traditions. It was a classic case of legal gymnastics. So Jesus says, *"you act like you care about God's word. But you love tradition, more than God's word."* And then, Jesus adds, *"and you do many such things"* (v. 12). And at that point, I just kind of expect Jesus to drop the mic, right? *"I'm out."* The Pharisees built fences around God's word. They created rules for obeying the rules. But those fences ultimately fenced them off from God's heart. They came to care more about their traditions than God's heart.

And that's a constant danger for God's people. In our zeal to obey God, we can create additional rules for obeying God's rules. But we can become more concerned about following extra-biblical guidelines than about really pursuing the heart of God. I have a friend who worked with High School students. And his church had strict guidelines for male-female interactions. Staff members were not allowed to be alone with a student of the opposite sex. Now, I think it's wise for churches to adopt these kinds of policies. But here's what happened. One night my friend was at church. His group was meeting. And he looked outside and saw a female student crying. So my friend walked outside to see what was going on. As it turned out, this young woman's life was falling apart. So my friend sat down next to her. He shared the gospel with her. And ultimately, he led this young woman to Christ. Well, his boss caught wind of this. And he reprimanded my friend for having a 1-on-1 conversation with this young woman. Now, my friend responded very graciously. He didn't argue. But for his next sermon, he decided to preach on John 4; which is all about Jesus' encounter with a woman. And that woman just so happens to be alone. And they just so happen to have a 1-on-1 conversation; in which he just so happens to share the gospel. So my friend made his point in a more subtle way.

But here's the point for us; we need to read the Bible with balance. We need to care about every aspect of God's agenda. God's will isn't divided. And God doesn't call us to obey one part of the Bible in such a way that it causes us to disobey another part. Listen, everyone gravitates towards different parts of Scripture. Some parts of Scripture make us go, *"yeah!"* Other parts make us go, *"hmm."* But if I have a heart for God, I want to understand everything Scripture teaches, and to put it into practice. I want to walk in *all* of God's ways.

Jesus exposes the Pharisees' hearts. And then, he finally gets around to answering their question. *"And after He called the multitude to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup> there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. <sup>16</sup> "If any man has ears to hear, let him hear."* (vv. 14-17)

Jesus thinks this is a teachable moment. So he answers the Pharisees' question. But he invites the crowds to come and hear his answer. The Pharisees asked, "*why do your disciples eat with unwashed hands?*" In effect, Jesus says, "*because unwashed hands don't defile people.*" But Jesus takes things a step further. He says that *nothing* outside a person can defile her. Defilement doesn't come from without, but from within. That was a radical statement. So radical, that Jesus' disciples struggled to grasp it. So they ask for clarification: "*And when leaving the multitude, He had entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable.*"<sup>18</sup> *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; <sup>19</sup> because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.)*" (vv. 17-18)

The disciples are perplexed by Jesus' statement. And that's understandable. These men read their Bible. In the Old Testament, God makes a distinction between clean and unclean things. And if you ate unclean food, you became unclean. But Jesus says that *nothing* outside a person can make him unclean. Jesus' teaching doesn't just conflict with Pharisaic traditions. It appears to conflict with the Old Testament. So the disciples ask, "*uh, Jesus, what exactly did you mean by all of that?*"

In response, Jesus doesn't soften his teaching. He just reasserts his basic point; and explains it in greater detail. He says food can't corrupt us, because it doesn't stay in us. Food doesn't go into our hearts; into the deepest part of us. Rather, it goes into our stomachs, and is expelled. And, in saying this, Jesus assumes something that's explicit elsewhere in Scripture. He assumes that the Old Testament food laws had a temporary function. Unclean food was like a visual aid. It reminded God's people of sin's defiling power. The food laws revealed that people needed cleansing. But now, the cleanser has come! Jesus offers the ultimate forgiveness and cleansing that the people needed. So the food laws pointed to Christ. But now that Christ has come, they've served their purpose. Thus they're no longer in effect. And now, God's people can eat whatever they want. Now, all of this *wasn't* clear to Jesus' disciples. In fact, it took them years to grasp the implications of Jesus' teaching. But it *is* clear to Mark. He understands the significance of Jesus' statement. So he adds an editorial note in verse 19. According to Mark, Jesus is here declaring all foods to be clean. And therefore, no foods are off limits.

Jesus explains why defilement *doesn't* come from the outside. But then, he explains why it *does* come from the inside: "*And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man.*"<sup>21</sup> *"For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries,*<sup>22</sup> *deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness.*"<sup>23</sup> *"All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."* What comes out of us reveals what's in us. And what's in us isn't pretty. Jesus says our hearts are evil.

In Scripture, the heart is the core of one's being. It's that part of you where beliefs and judgments and hopes and fears are formed. So Jesus says there's a problem at the very *center* of who we are.

And the problem isn't minor. Jesus' lists the 12 problems with our hearts.<sup>2</sup> 12! Look. If you have 12 concerns with something, it's not a minor problem. If your supervisor gave you a performance review, and said, "*well Jim, you're a nice guy. But we see 12 areas where you need improvement*" you might start looking for a new job. If you came up to me after this sermon, and said, "*hey Jeff, thanks for that; but I've just got 12 concerns with your sermon*" – I'd probably go in the corner and cry. Look, no one "*just*" has 12 concerns with anything. So the heart is a *massive* problem.

Just look at what comes out of it! The heart produces "*evil thoughts*." I have this inner critic. He provides a running commentary of my life. It's almost sub-conscious. But this internal critic is continually judging people. He's cutting them down, ever so slightly. I make these reflexive mental comments. "*Ooh that was embarrassing for you.*" "*Oops, getting mad at your kids. I haven't done that today.*" "*Hey, look at what you're wearing. How about that?*" "*Someone put on a few pounds.*" And here's what scares me about this. *First*, it's instinctive. My reflex is *not* to think charitable, gracious thoughts. No, my *reflex* is criticism. And I have to actively think my way out of that. Here's the *second* thing that scares me. I like doing it. Initially, it doesn't make me feel bad. It makes me feel better about myself. Tearing people down lifts me up. Evil thoughts just bubble up out of our heart. So do thefts and coveting and envy. I want other people's stuff. Or I want their life. Or, I just don't want other people to succeed. I'm sad when others are blessed. Murders and wickedness come out of the heart. Maybe we have revenge fantasies; or we curse people; or, we day-dream that they'll suffer misfortune. Those kinds of affections are murderous. Fornications, and adulteries and sensuality come from the heart. Perhaps we fantasize about sex outside of God's boundaries. Or, we selfishly objectify a person; and imagine that they exist to meet our physical or emotional demands. Slander comes from the heart. Perhaps we enjoy poisoning the well. We want to give someone a bad name. Or, we just enjoy talking negatively about someone; not to their face, of course; but in the company of others; or, maybe just in the comfort of our own minds. Deceit comes from the heart. That's the propensity to mislead; either deliberately, or by telling half-truths; or, by avoiding people; or, by just not being completely transparent. Finally, pride and foolishness come from the heart. Foolishness is stupid impulsiveness. It's being governed by immediate urges. And pride is the most insidious sin of all. It's an inflated view of self; self-focus.

To sum up, Jesus says that the heart of our problem is the problem of our heart.<sup>3</sup> And really, he's not saying anything new. He's just expanding on the words of Jeremiah, who said,

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<sup>2</sup> The list could be read as containing 13 items. Or, "evil thoughts" could be construed as the general category of things which proceed from the heart, and the 12 examples that follow as concrete examples of "evil thoughts."

<sup>3</sup> Phrase taken from <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-truth-behind-el-chapo-guzman>.

*"The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?" (17:9).*

We have chronic spiritual heart failure. And the scary thing is, this problem isn't peripheral. My heart is the governing center of my life. It's *me*. Look, if you want to examine my actions, that's fine. But I wouldn't want *any of you* to examine my heart. Think of it this way.<sup>4</sup> Imagine that I had a machine which could monitor your thought-life. It could discern and translate what was happening deep inside you. And then, we could live-stream your thinking, and project it onto this screen. Would you want people to know everything you've been thinking about this morning? How about this week? I wouldn't sign up for that. But what's going on deep inside; what I don't want you to see; that *is me*. Apart from God's grace, *that's me*. And no amount of external change will solve this problem. Jesus confronted his culture with this message.

**2. How Jesus Confronts Our Culture:** But how is this message relevant for today? Purity seems like a religious idea, doesn't it? But we live in a fairly irreligious culture. So how does Jesus' message apply to us? Our culture has become increasingly secular. But I think we're still intensely concerned with purity. Every culture has purity codes. And ours is no exception. We want things to be whole and clean; to be undefiled by contaminants.

The Pharisees wanted pure food. And I mean, that's not so different from today, is it? People want things local, organic, farm-to-table, without antibiotics or hormones or gmo's, or preservatives, or – heaven forbid – gluten. Other people strive for ideological purity. We see this in presidential race, don't we? No candidate says, *"look, I'm a pragmatist. I'm going to compromise. I'm going to disappoint everyone a little bit. But hey, I'm competent. I'll actually get some things done."* No, each candidate wants to be the standard bearer for their cause; as the most conserving conservative who's ever conserved; or, as the most progressing progressive who's ever progressed; or whatever. And candidates are constantly attacking each other's ideological purity. Other people strive for purity of speech. You see this on college campuses. There's a powerful movement to purify discourse; to create dialogue that's free from harmful words, or ideas, or phrases that carry harmful connotations. Other people desire relational purity. More and more, I keep hearing people talk about *"toxic people."* Have you noticed that? We talk about the danger of toxic individuals. And entire books are written about how to purge such people from your life, or social circle.

People want to be pure; to be rid of contaminants. And Jesus affirms our desire for purity. We want to be holy; to be cleansed. But he says there's a deeper problem; and it's this – we're *not* pure. Our hearts are contaminated. And we can try to perfect our world. But we can't perfect ourselves. And because we can't perfect ourselves, we can't perfect our world. In fact, every time we try, we'll screw it up. Why? Because we're corrupted people, who are fueled by corrupt motives, who perform corrupt actions, that have corrupt consequences. Jesus says there's a problem at our core. It's a radical diagnosis. So we need a radical cure. And that's

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<sup>4</sup> Illustration adapted from one use by D.A. Carson.

what Jesus offers. Jesus was pure. One writer has said that Jesus created a contagion of purity.<sup>5</sup> Wherever he went, there was an outbreak of goodness. It was viral. Jesus touched diseased people. But he didn't contract their diseases. Instead, they contracted his healing presence. Jesus came close to wicked people. But he didn't become wicked. Instead, those people became righteous. Jesus purifies. And he dies to purify us. He carries away our sin. He removes the stain. And he rises to give us new life. And when we trust in Christ, we're united to him. And we're holy and blameless before God. That's our position in Christ. We're *clean* in him. And now Christ wants to clean up our hearts. He gives us a new heart that's receptive to him. He gives us his Holy Spirit, so that we can live as holy people.

But even as Christians, we're still in need of change. We still live in old, sinful bodies. And we have evil habits of the heart; old habits that we bring into our new life with Christ. And when we sin, it reveals what's going on inside of us. When we sin, it shows that our hearts are returning to old habits. We're still treasuring or trusting in the wrong things. So in order to change, we need to do more than modify our behavior. We need to identify what's going on in our hearts. We need to identify the false beliefs and false hopes. And then we need to replace these with God's truth. Remember, sin works from the *inside-out*. And so does change. And Scripture says we change by renewing our minds; by rejecting false beliefs in our hearts; and embracing God's truth. But how do you do this? Jeff Vanderstelt has come up with a helpful way of thinking about this. And I'm blatantly stealing his ideas here.<sup>6</sup> Each person is like a tree. Our hearts are like roots. And our actions are like fruit. So when we see bad fruit, we need to examine the root. How do we do this? Here's how. We need to examine what our actions reveal about our beliefs; specifically, our beliefs about ourselves, and our beliefs about God. Bad actions reveal faulty heart-beliefs about our identity; and about God's identity.

So let me give you an example. Say that you're a people-pleaser. You want to be loved. Or, you want to be feared. Or, in the words of Michael Scott, you want people to be afraid of how much they love you. But you're enslaved to the opinions of others. So you're anxious. You obsess over what people think. And you compromise your convictions in order to make people happy. What do your actions reveal about your heart? Well, what you're doing is grounded in who you think you are. So when you crave approval, what are you believing about your identity? Maybe it's, *"I'm only important if other people notice me."* Or maybe it's, *"I won't be okay unless other people think I'm okay."* And these beliefs about your identity point to deeper beliefs; they point to your concept of God; of what he has done and who he is. Maybe you think, *"I need to be noticed, because God doesn't notice me."* Or, *"I want people to take care of me, because God doesn't."* Or maybe you think, *"Sure, God loves me. But so what? That's kind of his job, isn't it? What I really want is to be loved by (fill in the blank)."* We need to identify the functional beliefs that drive our behavior. And then, we need to replace them with true beliefs.

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<sup>5</sup> Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* (Brester, MA: Paraclete, 2004); 159f.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.somatacoma.org/teaching-audio/2013/5/26/fruit-to-root>.

And we need to preach these true beliefs to ourselves. So we've identified some false views about God. Let's replace them with true beliefs. God is awesome. The nations are accounted as nothing before him. That's who God is. He is more magnificent and significant than anyone. So his approval should mean more to me than anyone else's. And this awesome God is gracious. He notices me. How do I know this? He sends Jesus to die for me. And now, I'm justified; God approves of me forever. So I already have God's approval. That's who I am; I'm approved by God. So the one who matters the most, loves me the best. And therefore, I don't need the approval of others. Instead, I can love them. I can serve them. That's one example of how to work through this process. And honestly, it's more of an art than a science. But I'd encourage you; when you see bad fruit, trace it back to the root. What false things are you hoping and trusting in?

If you're not yet a believer in Jesus, I'd challenge you to consider what he's saying. If Jesus' diagnosis is accurate; then you need outside help. You need someone who can remove the stain. And that's what Jesus does. He offers the solution. He dies to take away your stain. He rises to give you a holy life. And he offers to give you a new heart. And if you're interested in that, I'd love to speak with you more.

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