

The Heart of the Matter
Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian for Sunday 29th August 2021
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Text: Mark 7:1-23

Introduction

Imagine that a big revival breaks out in the Presbyterian church in Greymouth. We hear stories of people in large numbers flocking to hear the new charismatic preacher in town. News of transformed lives filters across the Alps to Christchurch where the Presbytery is based! What happens next? Of course, the Presbytery officials go to visit, to see what is going on, to make sure it is all kosher, to maybe see what they can learn from this, and maybe also to encourage and congratulate? There are all sorts of reasons they might make the trip across Arthur's Pass.

So it was in Jesus' day. We are starting a new series on the book of Mark. We come into the story halfway through. It is at a point where stories of the power of Jesus' ministry were spreading quickly, and he was drawing a large popular following. Just prior to this we read about the feeding of the 5,000!

So the Pharisees and the Scribes travel from the headquarters of Judaism, Jerusalem, to the back blocks of Galilee to investigate. There had been minor interactions with Jesus prior to this (2:23^f; 3:20^f), but now this was needing serious investigation.

From the outset, a key question is this: *Were they open-minded?*

Did they approach this with open minds and hearts, with a genuine desire to find out what was going on, or were they coming with a clear agenda of their own? I like to ponder this question because it challenges me about how I assess things that are new, or things that challenge my established understanding or cultural conditioning.

So, what about these Pharisees and Scribes? Were they curious? Did they have a genuine desire to learn? Were they conducting an open-minded investigation? Or were they on a mission to trap him? To discredit him? To judge him by their own narrow rules and regulations?

The story reveals it was more of the last of those motives than the first! Let me explain.

The Pharisees and Scribes were two distinct, if related, groups. The Pharisees were a popular movement that rose up amongst the Jewish people about 160 years before Christ, when the Greeks were in power in Palestine.

Greek culture, Hellenism, was overtaking Jewish culture and the Pharisee movement grew up to combat this, to preserve Jewish culture and religious practices. The key idea, from which they take their name, was to be 'set apart'. They were to promote a separation from influences that would dilute Judaism. In doing so they dug deeply into not only Jewish scriptures but also Jewish traditions, both the Torah (written scriptures) and Mishnah or Talmud (oral traditions). Initially this movement had merit and popular support. But as time progressed it morphed into a tight and legalistic movement bound up with rules and regulations. To the scriptures they added a myriad of extra rules that had grown up over the years. And they ordained these extra rules with the teaching that they actually came all the way back from Moses himself! That Moses did not only hand over the written scriptures (Torah), but also the oral traditions that their laws were based on! In fact, as time went on the Pharisees tended to elevate the oral traditions above the scriptures. They had a saying: 'the scriptures are like water, but the oral traditions are like wine.' And Jesus uses an example in the text of how they used a rule based on traditions as a loophole to avoid caring for elderly parents as commanded in scripture.

So, they arrived a Jesus' place with a comprehensive rule book with a growing myriad of laws that dominated their lives. And not only that, they brought their lawyers with them - the Scribes were the lawyers of the day. They wrote up the contracts of marriage, of sale and purchase, and oversaw the legal transactions of the day.

So they were coming with a big rule book and their lawyers. When do you take your lawyers with you? When you sense a serious conflict looming!

And so it is no surprise that the interaction with Jesus begins with a conflict. The disciples' hand washing routine did not measure up to the complex traditions of the Pharisees! It is an interesting example, because surely, originally, the handwashing rules set out in the Bible were about hygiene. But the Pharisees had over-extended these basic guidelines into a complex set of rules that had a life of their own unrelated to hygiene!

So how does Jesus respond? He responds with 2 principles of good religion:

1. Scripture has precedence of tradition.
2. The heart has precedence over the lips.

Let's examine each in turn.

1. Scripture and Tradition

Jesus makes this point by immediately quoting scripture. He quotes the 8th century prophet Isaiah with his prophetic words predicting the very debilitating religious practices of the Pharisees and Scribes. It is a not-so-subtle message about scripture trumping tradition. They would have understood that! That their over-reliance on traditional rules and regulations had bound them up and closed them off from the liberating principles of scripture! From my days of legal training, I remember a phrase from the 1924 Acts Interpretation Act which called for a 'fair, large and liberal' approach to the interpretation of legislations, lest we get bogged down and bound up by a narrow legalistic approach!

How do we apply this in our own lives?

As traditional churches in the western world decline, and the remaining faithful children of these churches go off to churches with names like Harmony, Grace, Equippers, Arise and Hope, questions are raised! Questions like, are we so stuck in our traditional ways, liturgies, rules and regulations, and close off to the essence of scripture and the inspiration of the Spirit in how we do church? Are we so bound up in tradition that we are closed to the changes needed to connect with a new generation of Christians? Challenging questions for those of us still in the traditional churches, once called mainstream, but increasingly marginal!

And if that is a collective question, a personal and individual question might be this – to what extent has the traditions and conditioning of my upbringing closed my mind to the cultures that now surround me? We have a growing and assertive bi-cultural journey happening in Aotearoa; we have a rapid expanding ethnic diversity in our neighbourhoods; we have a huge shift in the thinking about sexuality and gender in our younger generations. How am I coping with that *and* are my responses coming out of my traditional understanding of these things or from the principles in scriptures like Galatians 3:28:

'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

2. The Heart and the lips

Jesus calls the Pharisees and Scribes hypocrites! In English this word has interesting history. In Shakespeare's time it had its place in the world of acting. A good actor was praised as a splendid

hypocrite! That is, they were able to portray an image that was actually often quite different to who they were as a person.

The Pharisees, Jesus was saying, were splendid hypocrites! They had become so obsessed with outward obedience to the law that they had not paid attention to their hearts! Of course this was a generalisation, for there were people from their movement of good heart – Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea come to mind. But there was a trend of putting on an external show of goodness that was not matched by what was going on in the inside, in the heart!

The Jewish idea of the heart is interesting here – it is not just the seat of feeling as in Western thought, but rather it is this: Mind and emotions and will.

So with my heart I think, I feel and from that I act. And so, ultimately, Jesus is saying our actions will come from our thoughts and feelings, not from our external keeping of rules and regulations. Heart and lips connected is what Jesus wants, not a disconnected heart and lips that shows itself in acting rather than authenticity, hypocrisy rather than congruence.

I was at a friend's retirement function a few years back. In thanking his wife for her support, he decided to sing her a song. I knew for a fact that he was a terrible singer. I was preparing myself for cringe! But as he sang to her, it was so, so heartfelt, the quality of the melody was insignificant because heart and lips were in sync, and the heart definitely took precedence of the lips!

Jesus is saying something really important here to all of us – be not worried about how people see us! Rather, attend to the things of the heart – my thought patterns, my emotional well-being, my will. Humbly open those things up to the work of God in line with the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 139:23-24:

*Examine me, O God, and know my mind;
Test me, and discover my thoughts.
Find out if there is any evil in me
And guide me in the everlasting way.*

Or Psalm 26:2-3:

*Examine me and test me Lord;
Judge my desires and thoughts.
Your constant love is my guide,
Your faithfulness always leads me.*

A great question to reflect on as we close is this:

Where is the disconnect in my life?

Where are my heart and my actions out of sync? And how might I let God into my heart, the engine room of living life, to give me a good tune up!

Let's take some time to ponder that in the quietness of prayer – maybe follow this with a prayerful walk with God or a prayerful sit in the garden! For what a joy it is to see a person whose persona is in tune, in harmony and in sync with God, heart and actions together bringing blessing to God, to others and the beauty of creation!