

Connect360: The Heart of the Matter

February 28, 2025

- *Lesson 13 in the Connect360 unit “The reMARKable Journey Continues: The Gospel of Urgency” focuses on Mark 7:1-23.*

Jesus brought the issue of what makes one acceptable to God to the forefront. This was not a positive lesson from Jesus. He seemed a bit miffed at having to address the issue of hand washing. He was being criticized by some Pharisees and scribes for not teaching his disciples to follow religious tradition, specifically not washing their hands before supper.

The Pharisees were viewed as the gatekeepers of religious tradition of the day. They were self-appointed, goody-two-shoes when it came to Jewish practices and the law. They prided themselves on being the only ones in Israel to practice what they preached. They were especially good at pointing out when others failed to follow the rules. And in this text, they point out Jesus’ inability to teach his disciples according to the law, or at least their interpretation of the law.

It’s important to understand what “clean and unclean” meant in first-century Judaism. It isn’t a hygiene discussion. The issue of cleanness addressed in this Scripture is about morality, righteousness and the presence of sin. We shouldn’t feel bad not knowing this point, the author of the Gospel must explain what all the fuss is about to his own readers in verses 2-6.

The Gospel of Mark is likely, Peter’s story, written by John Mark to new believers in Rome around AD 60. These Christians did not come from a Jewish background as many of the traditions, like represented here in this

text, had to be explained. So why then is this story important if it's about a Jewish tradition that Jesus seemed to be against? How do we as the New Testament church deal with Old Testament law? Is it negated through Jesus? Or did Jesus, somehow, fulfill the law as he proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount? (Matthew 5:17-20).

Tension between religious practices was a common problem in the first-century church as it included Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jewish believers brought their traditions. And pagan worshipers certainly brought other traditions and rituals. We read about this tension in the New Testament letters written to Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and others. What about us? Do we have any traditions or rituals in the 21st century church? What about in the American church? What about as a Baptist church or another denomination?

For instance, what about the tradition of removing one's hat to pray. Does God ignore our prayer if we wear a baseball cap? (It may depend on the team.) Does wearing a cap during a time of worship make one unclean or less holy? For some, it might seem so. But what about cultures that require wearing a hat or a head-covering as a sign of reverence to pray?

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