

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Sep 2nd 2018

Once again, we find Jesus being confronted by religious authorities; in this case he is approached by some Pharisees and scribes. They came from Jerusalem and thus carried weight in the matter they questioned Jesus and the disciples about. They gathered around Jesus and observed negatively that Jesus' disciples did not do the prescribed ritual washing of the hands before they ate. Mark's gospel explains that "for the pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders."

They ask Jesus why this happens and he pushes back calling them "hypocrites" for their question; he refers to a passage from the Prophet Isaiah that they are people who honor God only with their lips and that they choose to disregard God's commandment and cling to merely human tradition.

The human tradition Jesus refers to ("the tradition of the elders") was not found in their Scriptures but they were part of human tradition. This tradition by the time of Jesus was understood to be peripheral and burdensome to understand and to implement. They were derived from good practices but were applied in an extreme manner and seemed to have missed the ultimate purpose of a good life flowing out of the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, the tradition of the elders seems to have become more important to the Pharisees and scribes than God's own commandment.

The point Jesus is making to the inquirers is that the defilement they seek to avoid in their accusing the disciples of not ceremonially washing their hands is not a cause of ritual defilement. That comes out of the very core of a person. An action is good or not because it is an external violation, but both goodness and defilement flow out of that core, one's heart.

How might we receive and react to the Pharisees' reactive criticism and Jesus' response to their questioning?

Jesus here affirms in the dialogue with the Pharisees that one's interior attitude is clearly far more important than merely fulfilling an external command. The ritual washing pales against the meal that is being prepared and shared together by the disciples.

Gracious God, you know us at the core of our being, our heart. Help us to serve you with generosity and peace. Be with us as we seek you with sincere hearts. We are grateful for your care for us and your call that invites us to be women and men of joy and concern for others.

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