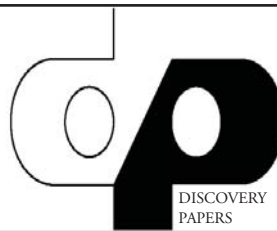


MATTERS OF THE HEART

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Communications consultant Wicke Chambers says, “people think listening is boring; it’s more fun to talk.” In the United States today, talking is seen as active and dominant and listening as passive but deferential, she says. “There’s the old joke, the opposite of talking isn’t listening; it’s waiting to talk. That’s what a lot of people do; they just wait to talk.”¹

How do we live in a world of many talkers and few listeners? We might consider starting by listening to our own hearts. What? Didn’t Jeremiah say that “the heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick”? (Jeremiah 17:9). Yes, but he also said that God would write his law on the hearts of his people (Jeremiah 31:33).

Jesus has gone about redefining the symbols of Israel that tended to separate Jews from Gentiles. He has already taken on cherished views concerning the temple, the family, and the Sabbath. In Mark 7:1-23, he takes on ritual washings and food laws, which kept Jews and Gentiles apart. Then, in Mark 7:24-8:10, he blesses a Gentile woman and both a man and a crowd in Gentile territory, signaling that God’s healing, loving rule is moving out in a radical way. The word “heart” binds together the narrative that concerns us presently.

Mark 7:1-23:

The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 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.) The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?” 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.

BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.’

Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”

He was also saying to them, “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER’; and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH’; but you say, ‘If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),’ you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that.”

After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, “Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. [If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”]

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. 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, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”²

Challenging Jesus

Earlier, Jewish leaders from Jerusalem journeyed north to Galilee and accused Jesus of being in league with the devil (Mark 3:22). Once again, leaders head north to challenge Jesus, who has attracted a following and poses a threat to conventional notions of the kingdom of God. The Pharisees, a religious-political pressure group, and scribes, experts in the Jewish law, are concerned that Jesus disregards traditional approaches to purity. The Mosaic Law prescribed ritual washings for priests but said nothing about the rest of the populace. For many Jews, however, ritual washings protected them from be-

ing contaminated by Gentiles. For them, such traditions were a sign of loyalty to both God and nation. If you practiced ritual washings, you were aligning yourself with those who advocated revolution against Rome. Failure to adhere to purity rituals invited charges of disloyalty.

Mark contrasts the delegation from Jerusalem with both Jesus and John the Baptist. Whereas Pharisees and scribes were concerned about being contaminated by Gentiles in the market place, Jesus entered the market place and healed the sick (Mark 6:56). The Pharisees and scribes are literally “baptizing” utensils, but John baptized people (Mark 1:5). The baptisms of John and the healings of Jesus signal the arrival of the kingdom of God and the new age, which broadens the influence of holiness, but the Pharisees and scribes, who are literally “grasping” the traditions of the elders, can’t let go of the old age. With the coming of the Messiah, the kingdom of God is moving outward to cleanse those on the fringes of Israel and even the Gentiles. The Pharisees and scribes, however, are expecting the new age to be even more exclusive than the old age. They are washing their hands and baptizing their pots in eager anticipation of the coming kingdom.

Who, then, speaks for God: the Pharisees and scribes of Jerusalem or Jesus of Nazareth? The Pharisees and scribes question Jesus about why his disciples don’t “walk” according to traditions of the elders and why they eat “bread” without washing their hands. In passages that immediately precede this one, however, Mark has depicted Jesus as “walking” on the sea and multiplying loaves of “bread.” Such mastery over God’s creation signals not only the presence of the kingdom of God but also the presence of a king who speaks for God. Jesus, not the Pharisees and the scribes, speaks for God.

Listening to hearts

The new age has been inaugurated by Christ. It is not yet here in full, but it is present nonetheless. Holiness, therefore, has a new power—the power to influence what it touches. Jesus invites us to believe in the power of holiness. If we believe in the power of holiness, we will be less concerned with being contaminated by the world and more concerned with bringing the influence of Christ to the world. We will head out in boldness, not pull back in fear. We will stride in the light of the new age, not cower in the darkness of the old. We will not lecture from afar; we will listen up close.

If we listen, we will hear stories of people who have been wounded by the arrows of life, including the arrows of the church. We’ll do more loving, based on real stories, and less scoffing, based on uninformed opinions. We’ll be less complaining and more compassionate. Instead of turning our noses and wagging our fingers, like the Pharisees and scribes, we’ll dress wounds and mend breaks.

Listening to listen will help us bring the influence of

Christ to the world. “It is impossible to overemphasize the immense need humans have to be really listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood,” says Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier. “Listen to all the conversations of our world, between nations as well as those between couples. They are for the most part dialogues of the deaf.”³ A world of talkers needs more listeners: people who take the time and effort to ask interested questions. Some of our new electronic forms of communication give us new opportunities to ask questions and listen to answers.

So, maybe you get to know someone and he says he wants to get married. You say “Wonderful!” He says he wants to get married to another man. Oh. And he’s livid because “those born-again Christians” voted in favor of Proposition 8 in California, so he can’t get married. You say, “That must be very painful. Tell me about it.” You meet someone else who tells you she can never forgive a friend who disowned her after she had an abortion. You say, “That must be very painful. Tell me about it.”

The days of gathering in a holy huddle to protect ourselves from a dangerous world are over. We must stride boldly, with humility and prayer, into the market place—into our workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods, and onto the internet—with open ears and healing words. In the new age, the love of God must not be confined; it must be turned loose.

Unmasking hypocrisy

Jesus refuses to answer the question of the Pharisees and scribes and instead unmasks their hypocrisy, thereby discrediting their supposed authority. If Jesus’ case against them is valid, then they have no right to speak for God. Jesus invokes the prophet Isaiah, who in his day accused the leaders of Israel of hypocrisy and warned of coming judgment. The Pharisees and scribes likewise adhere to extra-biblical traditions, supposedly for the sake of loyalty to God. However, their preference for traditions over the commandments of God proves not their loyalty to God but their distance from God. In reality, Jesus says, their hearts are far from God.

As an example, Jesus cites their tradition of setting aside resources for God instead of using them to care for their parents. According to the Ten Commandments, however, God would have them help their parents. Jesus shows how they used their tradition to circumvent the commandment to honor father and mother. Jesus indicates that according to the law, those who disregard the commandment in this way are in fact worthy of death. The judgment that hung over the heads of the leaders in Isaiah’s day now hangs over the heads of the leaders in Jesus’ day. On the other hand, and to their own demise, the leaders of Israel deemed

Jesus worthy of death, in part for violating their cherished traditions. Jesus could have cited other examples of hypocrisy, for he said that the Pharisees and scribes do “many things such as that.”

In verses 6-13, Jesus illustrates that the Pharisees and scribes have no authority to make the practice of ritual washings a litmus test for loyalty to God and nation. Jesus, not the Pharisees and scribes, speaks for God. Therefore, his expansive vision of the kingdom, not the confining vision of the Jewish leaders, will win the day.

Traditions and love

Perhaps, like the Pharisees and scribes, we talk a better game than we live. If so, will we let Jesus unmask our hypocrisy? For it is not so much hypocrisy in the church that undermines the case for Christ in the market place, it is unconfessed hypocrisy. Hypocrites don't listen, and they don't speak with authority. Broken hypocrites and humble hypocrites—recovering hypocrites—listen and speak with a compassion that carries its own authority.

Like the Pharisees and scribes, we have our traditions. Unlike the Pharisees and scribes, we cannot allow our traditions to overshadow the commandments of God to love the Lord our God and love our neighbors as ourselves. And if our traditions reinforce our arrogance, then they are getting in the way of love, and if they are getting in the way of love, then they prove not our loyalty to God but our distance from God. If it comes down to a choice between our traditions and love, then we will throw out our traditions and start over.

Many of the traditions at this church stem from our appreciation of the scriptures. Rare is the Sunday worship service when you will come here and not hear a text read and a sermon preached based on that text. Many of our classes and ministries feature Bible-based lessons or studies. What wonderful traditions! But we must be aware that it is all too possible to use the word of God to hide from our world or as a sword against our world instead of letting it expose the inner workings of our own hearts that we might bring the healing love of God to our world. If our Bible-based traditions mostly fill our heads with knowledge, reinforce our arrogance, and get in the way of love for God and neighbor, then we will reevaluate our traditions. We will not throw out the scriptures, but we will ponder them afresh. We must not let the word of God get in the way of love; we must let it lead us to love. We must let the word of God lead us to listen to the hearts of the people in our world.

And God help us if we, like the Pharisees and scribes, make our traditions a litmus test for loyalty to God. Although we may not go as far as the Pharisees and scribes with our traditions, we must guard against a subtle arrogance that tolerates other traditions but says, well, we really know best. We must raise our eyes and praise

God that he is working through many Christ-centered traditions in our world today and even through traditions that ostensibly have nothing to do with Christ at all. When we do so, we embrace our Lord's expansive vision of the kingdom of God, not the confining vision of the Pharisees and scribes.

On a recent overseas trip, three of us from this church taught at a conference that included thirty Roman Catholic priests. One of the priests wrote a beautiful poem in our honor. We enjoyed wonderful fellowship with their bishop, who took notes as we taught. He had to leave before the end of the conference because the pope called for him to come to the Vatican for a meeting with some scholars. We had fun with that, imagining what it would be like for the bishop to tell the pope, “Ah, I'm sorry. I can't come right now. I'm having a wonderful time here at a conference with the pastors from Peninsula Bible Church.” We imagined the pope responding, “What? Peninsula Papal Church?” Speaking of the pope, both Steve Holmlund, one of our elders, and I read parts of his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, on the trip and were impressed by his sound exegesis of the gospels. As an evangelical Bible church, we have been blessed by other traditions, which have helped us see that we're connected to one ancient tradition and have helped us value emotions, use our senses, appreciate art, and worship God from a deeper place.

The new covenant

According to the scribes and Pharisees, whether one washed oneself before eating was related to what one had eaten. The Mosaic Law distinguished between clean and unclean foods. Many Jews, by eating only clean foods, marked themselves out as God's people. For them, food laws, like ritual washings, were intertwined with loyalty to God and nation and to the hopes for liberation from Rome. Therefore, after responding to the scribes and Pharisees' question about washings, Jesus speaks about food laws.

After his first confrontation with a delegation from Jerusalem, Jesus began shrouding his vision of the kingdom of God in parables in part to avoid arrest (Mark 4:1-2, 10-12). A straightforward presentation of his vision would have attracted even more unwanted attention from potential enemies and thus placed his mission at risk. Once again, Jesus employs a parable, this time to address food laws, a religious and political hot potato. He implores those in the crowd who had flocked to him to “listen” and “understand,” inviting them to attend to the deeper meaning of his cryptic assertion concerning defilement. If he were to speak straightforwardly and controversially about the food laws, he might have provoked a riot. Jews in the not-too-distant past died for refusing to eat unclean food (2 Maccabees 6:18-31, 7:1-42). Similarly, the prophet Daniel risked his life by refusing to eat unclean food (Daniel 1:8). For Jews, much more was involved in food choices than a decision

between McDonald's and Fresh Choice.

Although Jesus speaks in parables to throw his enemies off track, he expects his disciples to comprehend him by now. The deeper meaning of the parable, however, eludes them. Once again, as in Mark 4, Jesus speaks cryptically in public to the crowd in order to avoid arrest but openly in private to his disciples in order to instruct them.

Where matters of the "heart," or personality, are concerned, food is irrelevant, Jesus says. The problem is not an impure diet but an impure heart, which is the source of evil thoughts, which give rise to evil words and actions. The scribes and Pharisees scrupulously adhered to the food laws, but they did not adhere to God: Jesus said their hearts were "far away" from God. From the beginning, the food laws illustrated evil in the human heart. In a ritual way, they instructed the people of Israel to guard their hearts and distinguish between good and evil. But the food laws, like the whole of the law and like the Mosaic Covenant of which the law was a part, couldn't change the hearts of God's people. For that, a new covenant—a new partnership with God—was needed. Jesus, in speaking privately to his disciples, points the way forward to the new covenant promised by the prophets (Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:26-27). Jesus thus declares all foods clean—permissible for consumption by God's people. The new covenant will do away with the food laws and replace them with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, unlike the law, will work at the level of the heart. Furthermore, by doing away with the food laws, Jesus throws open the doors of the kingdom to Gentiles, who will no longer need to change their diet to join the people of God.⁴

Earlier, Jesus accused the Pharisees and scribes of neglecting the commandments of God in favor of the traditions of the elders. Now, he himself not only neglects the commandments of God concerning food, he also rescinds them. No wonder some are beginning to conclude that he's a dangerous heretic. He's either that or he speaks for God. If he speaks for God, why is he speaking in this way? Parts of the law, which was given to a particular nation for a particular time, were never intended to be permanent. The parts that particularly served to separate Jews from Gentiles—laws concerning Sabbath, circumcision, and food—were signposts that pointed forward to the coming of Christ and the Spirit. With the advent of Christ and the Spirit, some laws, like those concerning food, fade away. The Spirit writes the rest of the law on the hearts of God's people, enabling them to obey him from their hearts (Hebrews 8:10, where the writer quotes from Jeremiah 31:33).

In Mark 7:1-23, Jesus is not distinguishing between outward conformance and inward corruption but between total corruption and total renewal. True, the Pharisees and scribes could at times appear outwardly to be in conformance with the law, honoring God with their lips, but they also at times appeared outwardly to

defy the law, dishonoring their parents. If they were honoring God with their hearts, they would have honored their parents with their resources. The Pharisees and scribes needed renewal through and through. The new covenant makes such renewal possible—and anticipates the renewal of all things.

Listening to your heart

Whatever our traditions may be, they have not the power to change our hearts. This is not to denigrate traditions, for to be traditional is to be human. We need traditions and routines. If everything were up for grabs all the time, we'd go crazy. In their proper place, traditions are a vehicle through which God works. But they are just that: a vehicle. And what, in the new covenant, does God do, with or without our traditions? He changes hearts. He renews us through and through. He writes the law on our hearts that we might love the Lord our God and love our neighbors as ourselves.

If in the new covenant the Holy Spirit writes the law of God on our hearts, and the essence of the law is to love God first and neighbor second, then the new covenant is both relational and missional. Like a master farmer, God planted these two aspects of the new covenant in the Abrahamic Covenant, which he made with Abraham, and watered them in the Mosaic Covenant, which he made with Israel.⁵ In the new covenant, the relational and missional seeds of the ancient covenants burst forth like flowers in a garden. The Holy Spirit enables us to orient ourselves toward God in a worshipful relationship and shares with us God's mission to the world—that we might listen to the hearts of the people in our world.

The art of living in the age of the Spirit, then, includes distinguishing between which traditions to keep and which traditions to discard—and when to discard them because they have served their purpose. Two questions should be applied to such decisions: 1) Does this tradition help us love God or hinder us from loving God? 2) Does this tradition help us love our neighbor or hinder us from loving our neighbor? Jesus rewrote parts of the law in a way that illuminated its intent, so that Jews could eat with Gentiles and thereby bring the gospel to them and live out the gospel with them.

In order to love God and neighbor, to relate to God and follow him in mission to the world, we need to be renewed—in an inward way, but in an inward way that works its way outward, so that we are renewed through and through, in our heart and in our actions, in our love for God and in our love for our neighbor. For that, God gives us—has given us—his Holy Spirit, who has written the law on our hearts: in our personalities, which include our intellects as well as our emotions. Therefore, our emotions—our feelings, if you will—have a part to play in obedience to God. If the Holy Spirit has written the law on our hearts, we may then need to get to a place in our lives, with the help of the Spirit, where we can listen to our hearts so that we might live from our

hearts. Your heart isn't the only thing you listen to, of course, and though you will hear other things coming from it, you will also hear some inspiring sonnets. You will find love for God and love for neighbor in, of all places, your own heart. What you want to do becomes what you're supposed to do.

We're not Dorothy at the beginning of the *Wizard of Oz*, looking somewhere over the rainbow for what we want. No, we're Dorothy at the end of the *Wizard of Oz*, who finds what she's looking for in her own home. You find what we're looking for in your own heart, where the Spirit has written the law of God. The apostle Paul, when writing of the new covenant, says we don't have to "ascend into heaven" or "descend into the abyss." No, he says, "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (Romans 10:6-8). Therefore, we must be attentive to our hearts. Many of us, because we've buried our hearts to protect ourselves from an unsafe world, will have to do some digging.

The greatest commandments

Who speaks for God? The Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to him. When asked which was the foremost commandment, Jesus said, "The foremost is, 'Hear O Israel! The Lord your God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31). You find these commands in the gospel of Mark. You also find them in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Matthew 22:37-39, and Luke 10:27. Where else do you find them? You find them in your heart. How do we live in the new age? We obey the two greatest commandments. How do we do that? We might start by listening to our hearts, where these commandments reside, and see if that helps us listen to the hearts of the people in our world.

Brennan Manning remembers living in the community of the Little Brothers of Jesus in Saint-Remy France with a man named Dominique Voillaume. In particular, he remembers one New Years' morning:

The breakfast table grew animated when our discussion turned to our daily employment. The German brother remarked that our wages were substandard (sixteen cents per hour). I commented that our employers never were seen in the parish church on Sunday morning. The French brother suggested that this showed hypocrisy. The Spanish brother said they were rude and greedy. The tone grew more caustic, and the salvos got heavier. We concluded that our avaricious bosses were nasty, self-centered cretins who slept all day Sunday

and never once lifted their minds and hearts in thanksgiving to God. Dominique sat at the end of the table. Throughout our harangue he never opened his mouth. I glanced down at the table and saw tears rolling down his cheeks. "What's the matter, Dominique?" I asked. His voice was barely audible. All he said was, "*Ils ne comprennent pas.*" They don't understand!⁶

Let it not be said that we don't understand. Let it not be said that we didn't listen.

NOTES

¹ Quoted by Cynthia Crossen, "The Crucial Question for These Noisy Times May Just be: 'Huh?'" *The Wall Street Journal* (July 10, 1997), 1A.

² Literary structure:

A Pharisees and scribes gathered around Jesus (1)

B Traditions of the elders (2-4)

C Pharisees and scribes questioned Jesus about impurity (5)

D Jesus answered Pharisees and scribes, who disregard word for tradition (6-13)

A' Crowd gathered around Jesus (14)

B' Teaching of Jesus (15)

C' Disciples questioned Jesus about impurity (17)

D' Jesus answered disciples, who lack understanding (18-23)

³ Quoted by Cynthia Crossen, "The Crucial Question for These Noisy Times May Just Be: 'Huh?'" *The Wall Street Journal* (July 10, 1997), 1A.

⁴ Furthermore, what could Jews do in the new covenant that they couldn't in the old? Eat with Gentiles. Much of what Paul has to say in Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians concerns both the beauty and challenge of table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles in the churches.

⁵ God told Abraham, "And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" Genesis 12:3. God formed Israel to be a "kingdom of priests" which lived differently from the world but interceded for the world (Exodus 19:6).

⁶ Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press), 76.