

CEREMONIAL WASHINGS

Mark 7:1-13

Both the first and the second periods of Christ's public ministry in eastern Galilee reveal a striking contrast between His popularity with the masses and the growing opposition of the religious leaders. It was inevitable that His spiritual teachings should clash with the mechanical ritualism of the ecclesiastical authorities. Form without substance, letter without spirit, religiosity without godliness - such characteristics were naturally exposed by the simple, heart-searching words with which Christ spoke. He apparently welcomed the break and met the issue squarely and frankly. The third period of His public ministry in eastern Galilee found the popular confidence in Christ at its very height, but as it drew to its close it was made memorable by a bitter attack upon Him by the Pharisees and other leaders who had come from Jerusalem for the purpose of opposing Him.

It seems that the greater the acclaim of the people in general was for Christ, the more determined the Scribes and Pharisees were to discredit Him. On this occasion they hit upon the fact that Christ did not instruct nor encourage the disciples to observe the Jewish traditions concerning ceremonial cleanliness.

Originally, for the Jew, the Law meant two things: first and foremost, the Ten Commandments, and, second, the first five books of the Old Testament, or the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch contains a number of detailed regulations and instructions, but it also contains a series of great moral principles which must be interpreted and applied. In the fifth or fourth century before Christ there came into being a class of legal experts, whom we know as the Scribes. They were not content with great moral principles. They wanted these great principles amplified, expanded, and broken down until they issued in thousands of rules and regulations governing every possible action and every possible situation in life. Life was no longer to be governed by principles, but by rules and regulations. These rules and regulations were the tradition of the elders.

One of the aspects of these scribal rules and regulations which emerge in this passage is about the washing of hands. The scribes and Pharisees accused the disciples of our Lord of eating with unclean hands. There were definite and rigid rules for the washing of hands. This hand-washing was not in the interests of hygienic purity; it was ceremonial cleanness which was at stake. Before every meal, and between each of the courses, the hands had to be washed, and they had to be washed in a certain way. First, the hands were held with the finger tips pointing upwards; the water was poured over them and it was required that it run at least down to the wrist. While the hands were still wet each hand had to be cleaned with the other. When one hand was rubbed against the surface of the other, both hands were wet, but the water was unclean because it had touched unclean hands. Second, the hands had to be held with finger tips pointing downward and the water had to be poured over them in such a way that it began at the wrist and ran off at the finger tips. After all that had been done the hands were clean. To fail to wash in this manner was in Jewish eyes to be unclean in the sight of God. A man who ate with unclean hands was subject to the attack of a demon and was to become liable to poverty and destruction. A rabbi who once omitted the ceremony was buried in excommunication. Another rabbi, imprisoned by the Romans, used the water given to him for this hand-washing rather than for drinking and in the end nearly perished of thirst,

because he was determined to observe the rules. That to the Pharisaic and Scribal Jews was religion. It was the observance of rules and regulations like that which they considered to be the essence of the service of God.

When the storm broke, the situation gave Christ an opportunity not only to rebuke the Pharisees, but to expose the body of traditions to which they gave slavish obedience. Our Lord rebuked all formalism in religion and showed the essential difference between real purity of the soul and mere conformity to the requirements of men.

To the scribes and Pharisees these rules and regulations were the essence of religion. To observe them was to please God; to break them was to sin. This was their idea of righteousness and of the service of God. It was precisely because Christ had no use for all these regulations that they considered Him a bad man. There was a fundamental cleavage between Christ and them. There was nothing in common between their ideas of religion. They thought of it as ritual and ceremony and He thought of it as loving and conforming to the will of God and as loving and serving one's fellowmen.

The charge of the Pharisees was not that the Lord's disciples ate their food with dirty hands, but that they did not observe the ceremonial washings required by Jewish traditions. We have here a quibble and a lesson. The Pharisees did the quibbling, and Christ did the teaching. The question was one of ablutions and obligations. The Pharisees stood for the former, and Christ stood for the latter. Two kinds of defilement are here in view, outer and inner; defilement of the body and defilement of the soul. The religion of these people consisted in outward observances, which were superficial. What God looks at is the state of our hearts, not the condition of the skin.

Knowing these men through and through, Christ turned upon them, and in a passage of withering directness exposed the hypocrisy of their hearts and the hollowness of their religion. He began by applying to them a passage in their own Scriptures, which they had never applied in this way. He quoted Isaiah 29:13. He said, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoreth me with their lips. But their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men." Christ accused them of hypocrisy. A hypocrite is one whose life is a piece of acting without any sincerity behind it at all. The fundamental question is, How is a man's heart towards God and his fellowmen? If in his heart there are enmity, bitterness, grudges and pride, not all the outward religious observances in the world will make him anything other than a hypocrite.

Anyone to whom religion is a legal thing, or the carrying out of certain external rules and regulations, is in the end bound to be a hypocrite. The reason for that is this, he believes that he is a good man, if he carries out the correct external acts and practices, no matter what his heart and his thoughts are like. To take the case of the legalistic Jew in the days of Christ, he might in his heart hate his fellowman with all his heart, he might be full of envy and jealousy and concealed bitterness and pride; that did not matter so long as he carried out the correct hand-washings, and observed the correct laws about cleanness and uncleanness. Legalism takes account of a man's outward actions, but it takes no account at all of his inward feelings. He may well be meticulously serving God in outward things and bluntly disobeying God in inward things, and that is hypocrisy.

The Mohammedan prays to his god at least five times each day. To do so he carries his prayer mat; wherever he is he will unroll the prayer mat, fall upon his knees, say his prayers and then go on. There is a story of a Mohammedan who was pursuing a man with upraised knife to murder him. Just then the call to prayer rang out. Immediately he stopped, spread out his prayer mat, knelt, said his prayer as fast as he could, and then arose and continued his murderous pursuit. The prayer was simply a form and a ritual, and an outward observance.

Christ here exposed ancient and modern ceremonialism, traditionalism, formalism and externalism in religion. He showed how opposed ritualism may be to reality, tradition to truth, and decrees to duty. Clean hands can never compensate for an unclean heart; washing can never atone for wickedness, nor lip-honor for heart-hypocrisy. Pretending to observe the law, the Pharisees outraged it; so do people who sing the praises of God on Sunday, and cheat or slander their neighbors all through the week.

According to the law of God one was obligated to honor his father and mother; he should care for them and provide for their needs. According to an accepted tradition, "Corban," which means a "gift," this property would be regarded as dedicated to God; but the tradition further provided that, while the property could not then be given to any other person, it could be used by its owner for his personal gratification and delight. Thus it became possible for a man to allow his parents to suffer while he was himself possessed of wealth. He could thus be keeping a tradition, which related to mere external form relative to religious gifts, while at the same time he was breaking one of the Ten Commandments and violating the fundamental law of love.

Our Lord was attacking a system which put rules and regulations before the claim of human need. He made it clear that nobody has any right to allow rules and regulations to paralyze the claims of love and charity.