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What Really Matters to God
Mark 7:1-23, James 1: 19-25

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ² they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³ (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands,^[a] thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴ and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it;^[b] and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.^[c]) ⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live^[d] according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" ⁶ He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." ⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."^[e]

¹⁷ When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ He said to them, "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹ since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

They country has been celebrating an American Hero in the passing of Senator John McCain this week.

Most of us ***long for a hero*** to admire, don't we?
I think that's why we have honored him so much.

It's good to remember the people who bring out the best in us, and our nation.

Who qualifies as a hero?

Certainly people of incredible ***courage*** like John McCain—those who give their lives in self-sacrifice for a greater good, including his time as a P.O.W. for 5 years.

In the words of his daughter, he thought the world was worth fighting for.

We also value people who are ***real***.

McCain was real, straight-talking, a maverick.

With salty language and a fiery temper.

We admire a lot of that.

But he was at the same time,
a man of great ***humility and grace***,
of ***generosity and humor***,

ready to admit his own faults, and apologize when necessary.

He was a man with the capacity for unbelievable forgiveness—
who even forgave his captors in Vietnam.

Wow.

We heard stories of his ***legendary fights*** with friends and enemies,
but ultimately he was the one who took the ***high road***—
not stooping to mud-slinging, or slanderous personal attacks.

But perhaps the thing we admire most in people like Senator McCain
is his ***integrity*** and his ***commitment*** to not just ***say*** what was right—
but to ***DO what was right***.

This love for his country, his family, his God, it led him to not just hear or say
the right thing---it led him to ***DO it***.

This is what both ***James and Mark*** are talking about today,
In the life of faith.

They are talking about not just ***hearing*** God's word,
not just ***saying*** you follow God,
but actually ***DOING it***.

It's interesting that in Mark's Gospel we do see people striving to do the word
of God, the Pharisees.

The Pharisees get a very ***bad rap*** by us today—

but they were men of God, and they strived to follow the laws of God. This is the whole reason they are accusing Jesus' disciples—because the disciples are not washing their hands before eating, which was Jewish custom and law.

But Jesus says you've ***got this all backwards***.
It's not what goes into the body that matters,
It doesn't cause defilement, or make us unclean.
It's what comes out of the heart that matters.
That's what can make us unclean.

And Jesus does not say that washing hands is ridiculous or unnecessary. He says that the men pointing this out are ***talking*** about following God, but their ***hearts*** are not in it.

*Jesus said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you **hypocrites**, as it is written,*

*'This people honors me with their **lips**,
but their **hearts** are far from me;
⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'*

⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Jesus was like that—he could ***see right through to the human heart***.
And Jesus points out their ***hypocrisy***.
You ***say*** you honor God.
But your ***hearts*** say otherwise.

Jesus cares about the human heart.
We can't just ***say*** what is right, or go through the ***motions***.
We have to have it in our ***hearts***.

Isn't this why we admire certain people?
Isn't this why we aspire to follow Jesus?
Because they are ***true—inside and out?***
Because their ***hearts and motives match their actions?***

You know, one of the main ***critiques*** of Christians today is ***hypocrisy***.

We say we believe in God, but we don't act like it.
 We say we believe in love, but we don't actually love our neighbors.
 We **talk** a good talk, but we don't **walk** the walk.
 So people outside the church accuse us of being hypocrites.
 And truth be told, sometimes we are, for we are fallen, sinful people.

James points out the 'walk the walk' hypocrisy.
 The difference between just **hearing** the Word of God, and **doing** it.
 James says,
let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;
²² *But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*

All of us can be in church and **hear** what God wants of us.
 The question is—can we **connect that to our daily lives?**
 Can we take the prayers and songs and scriptures and sermons,
 And translate it into daily activity?
 Especially when it means making a change?

If you hear that God is good, and you tell others God is good, that's great.
 But what happens when we hear that God wants us to welcome the poor,
 the immigrant, the outsider, the sick?
 Do we believe that, hear that and then—**do it?**

If we hear that God wants us to **give**,
 and we put something in the plate, that's great.
 But what happens when we hear that God wants us to give generously,
 proportionately, sacrificially, not just something small?
 Do we hear, believe, and then **give accordingly?**

This is what Jesus and James are talking about.
 A **connection** between God's Word, and our hearts and lives.

Hypocrisy is a **disconnect**—between **values and behavior**.
 It comes out **two different** ways.

One is the way of the **Pharisees** and us—
 when we say we'll do it,
 when we even go through the motions in our behavior,
 but we don't actually **believe** in what we are doing.

The other is the temptation in James—
to **hear about following** God, but we don't actually **do** it.
They are **equally dangerous** sins.

What God wants from us is a **connection**—
between **our heart, head, words, and actions**.

Where do we find this in our **own lives**?
Where do we find this in our own faith?

It's so easy to **say one thing and fail to follow up**, isn't it?
These sins of **omission** are prevalent in our lives, aren't they?
We miss opportunities to do what we say we believe
We fail to stand up for what is right.

It's also so easy to go through the **motions** of faith,
and **not have it embedded** in our hearts.
So that when the tough times come, and temptations hit, we **falter** in faith.

The Bible has many simple **declarations of ways to live our faith**.
Touchstones if you will.

Micah 6:8 is one of them.

*God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Dueteronomy 6:5 in the Shema, we are told:

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and
with all your might.*

And Jesus himself told us the **Greatest Commandments** in Matthew 22:
'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and
with all your mind.'³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment.³⁹ And a
second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'⁴⁰ On these two
commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

These are all words to hold in our **heart**,

And words to *live* by.

In a world when *words are so often used* for pain and suffering,
to hurl insults and hatred,
these are words that bring *life*.

God's Word is the *Word of life*.
If we take it to heart.
If we live it in our actions.

So how do we find the *connection*?

Where do we find the kind of *faith that is tried and true*?
How do we avoid the *trap of hypocrisy*?

We need the *help of Jesus*, friends.
We need the help of Jesus to *be the people we say we are*,
to follow the God we say we follow.

And we look to the good examples around us,
we find ourselves *inspired* by those who have gone before us,
But most of all we *look to Jesus*—the life, ministry, death and resurrection of
Jesus Christ.

And we do this, *NOT just on Sundays*.
We do this first and foremost *every other day* of the week—
Monday through Saturday.

Sunday is our day to be *refreshed, renewed*
and reminded of God's love and God's direction for our lives,
so that we can go out and be the disciples of Jesus.

Jesus tells us what to do—
to *share* the Good News.
To *love* God, and our neighbors as ourselves.
To make more *disciples*.

How are we doing this in our *everyday lives*?
Where do you find an opportunity to *live out* your faith?

To not just believe or say you believe, but to ***do it?***

You know, the book of ***James*** has received a bad rap over the centuries, for seeming too legalistic.

The truth is, it has some of the best ***practical advice*** for Christian life. It's not about legalism, it's about walking the walk for Christ.

So, in the words of ***James*** this week, where will you find a time in your life,

to be quick to listen,

slow to speak, slow to anger?

Can you think of a place and time—where you can do that this week?

It's not easy,

but we believe that God helps us do it!

And the reward is amazing!

I think of some difficult situations,

some difficult people,

and I think of how I can ***listen more, speak less, and act in love.***

What about you?

In the words of ***Jesus***,

Where will you find a time to honor God with your ***lips, and your heart?***

Can you think of a place and time, when you can do that this week?

Where you can ***walk the walk?***

If you are wanting to ***stand up*** for what's right—

where and when can you do that—this week?

I want you to take your bulletin and write down a situation

where you can ***love, live, and act—this week.***

A person or situation where you can say and do what God wants.

And now I want you to take a moment,

to ***think*** about that, and ***pray for God's courage and strength,***

To be the person God made you to be,

The people God made all of us to be.....

There's a hymn we sing in this church,

Lord, I Want to Be a Christian.

And you probably remember how it goes—

*Lord I want to be a Christian **in my heart**, in my heart,*

Lord I want to be a Christian in my heart.

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel*** today,

We can be people of faith—whose ***words, and deeds, and hearts*** line up.

May we all be Christian, in our words, our actions, and our hearts.

For that, all God's people said, Amen.