

Ordinary #22B (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

## **The Pharisees are usually viewed as simply majoring in minutiae. But that does a disservice to them and obscures the issues.**

by [Cynthia M. Campbell](#) in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

Have you ever been in a conversation in which it seemed that you and another person were not talking about the same thing even though you were arguing about it strenuously? Something like that is going on in Mark. Jesus and the Pharisees are in conflict with one another but not necessarily about the same things and certainly not on the same terms.

While Jesus is teaching and healing around the lake region in Galilee, some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem come north to investigate the popular rabbi-healer. This seems to be the first conflict with religious leaders from Jerusalem, but it is not the first time that Jesus has been criticized for violations of religious rules.

In this scene, the religious officials observe that Jesus and his followers are eating without first purifying (washing) their hands. The New Revised Standard Version uses parentheses to mark off the next verses, which explain “the tradition of the elders” that requires washing of one’s hands and food before eating. Jesus responds with a text from Isaiah that condemns those who comply with religious forms while “their hearts are far from me.”

To keep the focus on the question of purity and eating with “defiled” hands, the lectionary omits the verses in which Jesus counterattacks by lifting up an example of using a technicality of the religious law to avoid fulfilling a deeper obligation. Describing something that sounds very much like a first-century tax shelter, he accuses the religious leaders of permitting someone to get around his obligation to support his parents by declaring that his assets have been set aside as an offering to God.

Jesus then returns to the issue raised by the Pharisees: what defiles a person is not what comes from the outside (dirt or other contamination that can be removed by washing) but rather what comes from inside the person. What makes a person unclean are the “evil intentions” of the heart: “fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.”

It is at this point that we experience two parties talking past each other. One imagines the Pharisees saying: “Well, of course! Violations of the moral law arise from the heart and mind and will. But that’s not what we were talking about! We were talking about laws having to do with religious purity!”

The Pharisees are usually viewed as simply majoring in minutiae. But that does a disservice to them and obscures the issues. Scholars today suggest that the Pharisees should be understood as a reform movement within Jewish life of the first century. Their goal was to help ordinary people become more observant of the law (both written and oral) as a way of affirming or reinforcing their Jewish identity. For this religious minority living in an occupied territory of the Roman Empire and in the diverse culture of the Mediterranean world, a critical problem was how to keep faith and traditions alive and vibrant. The Pharisees’ solution was to insist that some of the laws required of the priests be extended to all. The washing of hands, food and cooking utensils was one example. For most Pharisees, these observances did not replace the moral law but were considered important religious (we might say “spiritual”) disciplines.

Jesus takes a different tack. Especially in Mark’s Gospel, he is portrayed as one who is constantly violating various religious observances in favor of doing ministry. Jesus heals on the Sabbath, touches a leper and a dead child, is touched by the woman suffering from hemorrhages and does not fast. He eats with tax collectors and other notorious sinners. Each of these is a violation of the Pharisees’ understanding of religious laws that were designed to maintain boundaries between faithful or observant Jews and all others. Jesus’ behavior seems to say: beware when religious observance gets in the way of fulfilling the heart of the law, which is love of God and neighbor.

Perhaps our situation today makes it especially easy for us to identify with that in Mark. For many Christians, there seems to be a need to find ways to guard the borders of religious identity. All sorts of issues are lifted up as identity-defining, and the stance one takes with respect to them determines whether one is a “real

Christian.” In the American context, most of these issues have to do with human sexuality. Abortion, contraception and homosexuality have all been made into boundary-defining issues; they have become the “lines in the sand” for whether one judges others to be Christian or not. In the minds of many, these are not matters on which Christians may hold divergent opinions and remain in fellowship with others. Rather, opposition to these practices is seen as part and parcel of maintaining the core of Christian faith in an increasingly secular world.

It is worth noting that Jesus does not condemn the practice of ritual cleansing; neither does he condemn observance of the Sabbath. Both are good and salutary traditions. In fact, both practices are part of a healthy life as well as ways to honor God. The problem arises when religious practices and doctrines that are intended to bring life and health to the spirit and community become barriers to reaching out to others with the love, justice and mercy of God—or when “human traditions” are substituted for “the commandment of God.”

The question that drove the Pharisees and that motivates some contemporary Christians is an important one: in a religiously diverse culture, how does one maintain Christian identity and integrity? When we respond, we can do no better than Jesus did when asked what was the greatest of all of God’s commands—love God and neighbor. It is as simple and as complex as that.