

Matters of the heart: Sunday, September 3

*Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

by [Heidi Husted](#) in the [August 16, 2000](#) issue

"There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile a person." Or as Eugene Peterson translates it, "It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life." I'm tempted to disagree. A few months ago I visited Senegal, West Africa. I spent the entire six-hour return flight from Dakar to Paris in the airplane bathroom. I was so weak and dehydrated that I was taken by wheelchair to the medical center at Charles deGaulle Airport. It was probably some intestinal bug, or a reaction to the malaria prevention drug I took, but it was undoubtedly something I swallowed. "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile" a person? I'm sorry, but I felt defiled.

What goes into a person *can* defile a person. Ask a drug addict or an alcoholic: it's the drugs or the booze that's at fault. But Jesus's diagnosis is that there's a deeper problem that comes from within. Spiritual impurity or moral defilement starts on the inside. It arises from the heart. We all suffer from this heart disease, from a kind of spiritual arteriosclerosis for which the only cure is the healing medicine of Jesus's grace.

In the Bible the heart is not simply the organ that pumps blood through the body; it's a metaphor for a person's innermost core or spiritual center. "Heart" is shorthand for "the total person," for "one's whole being or self." A pure heart is a life directed and devoted totally and unreservedly to God. God sees, tests and searches the hidden depths of the human heart. The phrase "hardness of heart" is used not only for God's people's enemies, like Pharaoh in Egypt, but also for God's people, Israel. In the New Testament it describes not only the scribes and Pharisees but also the disciples (Mark 6:52). A hardhearted person is self-centered, impervious to spiritual things, resistant or closed off to God and what God wants to do in that person's life. It is deep below the surface of our lives, then, that God begins a work of renewing grace in us. The real action is deep in the heart.

Jesus takes issue with those whose spiritual focus is on the surface, who are concerned solely with outward actions. He is perturbed by those who have reduced religion to doing the “right things,” to looking good, to maintaining outward appearances. He is repulsed by their superficial, skin-deep faith because, as C. F. D. Moule says, “Externals are worse than useless, unless the heart is in the right place.”

Jesus saw a preoccupation with the external when he looked at the scribes—the expert Bible teachers, the religion professors with their PhDs in theology and hermeneutics—and the Pharisees—the devout guardians of the faith, the religion experts, the senior pastors and serious churchgoers. These people knew the holiness code cover to cover and could quote you chapter and verse. They’d become “purity professionals,” ritual specialists.

But something was wrong, something was missing. The more they focused on outward actions, the less attention they gave to inner attitudes. They were going through the motions but losing sight of their deeper motivations. They focused on the rules but neglected a relationship with the living God. They gave lip service but did not give themselves in loving service. They washed their hands but did not have a clean heart.

“You hypocrites!” Jesus says, quoting the prophet Isaiah. You play-actors, you pretenders. You phonies! It’s ironic that the first-century Bible believers and the big-time Bible defenders are the ones who end up being the worst Bible breakers, because they do not realize that, as Mary Ann Tolbert says in *Sowing the Gospel*, “if the heart is God’s ground, nothing else is required; and if the heart is not God’s ground, nothing else will suffice.” “Imagine a youngster learning to play the piano,” suggests Frederick Buechner. The child “holds his hands just as he’s been told . . . he has memorized the piece perfectly. He has hit all the proper notes with deadly accuracy. But his heart’s not in it, only his fingers. What he’s playing is a sort of music, but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping.”

When it comes to faith, are our hearts in it or only our fingers? Are we allowing God’s renewing grace to work in us from deep within? Are we willing to be changed from the inside out?

Some time ago, a man in my church who was attending a class on spiritual transformation told another member, a 94-year-old woman, about the class. She responded, “I’d like to go!” It’s never too late to experience the ongoing

transforming presence of God in our lives. We're never too old for God to work on us from the inside out.