INNER PURITY

Mark 7:1–30

Key Verses: 7:14,15

“Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.’”

At the beginning of a new year many people make resolutions to improve their lives by getting out of debt, saving more money, exercising or healthier eating. But not many people pursue growing in purity. In today’s study we want to learn what purity is, why it’s so important, and how we can grow in purity. As we study this passage may God help us really learn from Jesus.

Look at verse 1. This is not the first time in Jesus’ ministry that these people showed up. We first saw the Pharisees and teachers of the law back in chapter 2. They didn’t like it when Jesus proclaimed the forgiveness of sins (2:6,7). Basically, the Pharisees didn’t like Jesus’ message of grace. As they watched his new ministry, they questioned why he ate with sinners and tax collectors (2:16). They questioned why he didn’t teach his disciples to fast (2:18). They questioned why he let his disciples pick heads of grain on the Sabbath (2:23,24). They questioned why he would heal on the Sabbath, and when he rebuked them, they began plotting to kill him (3:1–6). Later, some came from Jerusalem and started telling people that Jesus was actually possessed by the devil, and that it was the devil’s power that was enabling him to drive out demons (3:22). In chapters 4–6 Jesus focused on ministering to people and training his disciples. But now in chapter 7 the Pharisees appear again. It seems that some were from Galilee, and that they had called for back-up from Jerusalem. It says they “gathered around Jesus,” not to learn, but to find fault.

What did they find? Look at verse 2. It says that “some” of Jesus’ disciples had not washed their hands before eating. They must have been too hungry to mess with it. But this was not just about good hygiene. It says they were “defiled.” And Mark explains further. Look at verses 3,4. The Pharisees were keeping a very strict tradition of washing. They washed not only their hands, but also cups, pitchers and kettles. They considered the marketplaces “defiled,” not with germs but with all kinds of unclean things. They not only kept these rules, but insisted that all good Jews keep them, too. It was such a serious matter to them that they asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?” (5)

Why was this such a big deal to them? The Pharisees actually began right after the Jews came back to their own land from the Babylonian Captivity in 538 BC. They were afraid that the Jews were melting into foreign cultures, losing their identity and morals. At first they emphasized teaching and keeping God’s word, which the Jews had been neglecting. It was really good. But over time, they lost the meaning and spirit of God’s laws. They focused only on outward forms. They also added many traditions to God’s word. The part of the Bible the Pharisees took very seriously was Leviticus. In that book God’s main message to his people is, “Be holy, because I am holy” (1Pe1:16; cf. Lev11:44,45; 19:2). Actually, God is still holy, and he still wants us as his people to pursue being holy like him. But what is holiness, really? Basically, holiness means being dedicated to serving God and obeying his will. But how can we possibly be holy? First of all, our broken relationship with God needs to be healed. The only way for that to happen is if we come to Jesus. Through Jesus God forgives all our sins, and he gives us the Holy Spirit. Then, as we allow God’s Spirit to lead us, we start resisting our sinful nature and start loving and obeying God from our hearts.

But the Pharisees were trying to make themselves holy by keeping all kinds of rules strictly. They were obsessed with rules, declaring certain things clean and other things unclean. Some of their rules were from the Bible; others had developed as “traditions of the elders.” If you touched anything that came out of the human body, you’d be defiled. After giving birth, a mother was unclean for a certain period of time. Touching a dead body, either human or animal, would defile you. Creeping creatures, idols and certain kinds of people would defile you. To the Pharisees, associating with lepers, Samaritans or Gentiles would defile you. During his ministry Jesus and his disciples were breaking all these rules. No wonder they were so upset with him. This time, it was about ceremonial hand-washing. That was not in the Bible; it was just a tradition of the elders.

How did Jesus respond to them? Read verses 6,7. With raw courage Jesus rebuked them as hypocrites. Only with their lips they worshiped God. Their hearts were far from God. So they were worshiping God in vain. They were teaching “merely human rules.” It’s still so easy to be a hypocrite. What’s a hypocrite? Often we think of it as a person who doesn’t practice what he preaches. But in this case, it means someone who’s different outwardly from who he really is inwardly. Outwardly the Pharisees looked holy, but inwardly they were not. It’s so easy to say the right things but have something else in our hearts. It’s so easy to go through the motions of going to church, but for our hearts actually to be far away from God. And it’s so easy to take human traditions seriously, but ignore God’s word. Read verse 8. To Jesus, this was how they had gotten off track. They let go of the commands of God and were holding on to human traditions.

Jesus gives them an example. Look at verses 9–12. He mentions their tradition of “Corban.” It was a way of declaring one’s possessions “dedicated to God,” and so, people could tell their parents in their old age that they could no longer afford to help them financially. With this tradition, they actually nullified God’s word to honor your father and mother. It was motivated by religious greed. Jesus severely rebuked them. Read verse 13. Human traditions originally might have had good intentions, but they are not absolute. There are so many human traditions in life, and often we’re not even aware of them, but we hold onto them as if they were absolute. For example, many men shave their faces their entire adult lives. Many women would never go out of the house without working on their hair and makeup. Certain families develop their own traditions, like watching a favorite movie together or listening to certain music. Certain schools have their traditions. There are sports traditions and holiday traditions and cultural traditions like going to the prom or having a bachelor’s party before a wedding. But unlike human traditions, God’s word is timeless, absolute truth. As we pay attention to God's word, we actually grow in personal knowledge of God and in spiritual discernment. So the Psalmist said, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps119:105). With God’s word we can start to distinguish between merely human ideas and God’s truth. God’s word also sheds light on what’s really in our hearts. It can be painful, but it’s really necessary.

Jesus not only rebuked the Pharisees; he taught the crowd an important lesson. Read verses 14,15. This was a revolutionary teaching. Jesus changed the whole focus in religion, away from outward things to inward things. To Jesus, purity or holiness is not about what we do outwardly, what we touch or what we eat or whom we’ve been with. Purity or holiness is about what’s going on inside us. Jesus said he wants us to really listen to what he’s saying and understand it.

Look at verse 17. Generally, it was good for the disciples to come and ask questions about what they didn’t understand. But this time Jesus rebukes them for being spiritually dull. Read verses 18,19. The most radical thing here is that Jesus declared all foods clean. Food is for our body’s nutrition but it has nothing to do with our relationship with God.

Read verse 20. To Jesus, what defiles us is what’s inside us, not outside. Then what is it? Read verses 21,22. Jesus says it all starts with “evil thoughts.” These evil thoughts develop into sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. These are all actions, but Jesus says they all start in our hearts, with “evil thoughts.” Outwardly we may look good, but even having secret thoughts involving any of these things makes us defiled before God. People look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. So Jesus challenges us to start paying serious attention to what we let into our hearts. As we think about this list of evils, so many of them have to do with the way we treat others. And they all seem to be related to self-gratification and self-promotion at the expense of others. What are evil thoughts? They are thoughts not based on God, thoughts that have no regard for God, no awareness of him. As we leave God out of our thought world, intrinsically we also start ignoring others and thinking more and more about ourselves. Sometimes it seems that evil thoughts just arise in our hearts, without us planning for it to happen. This can make us feel fatalistic, like there’s nothing we can do about it. But Jesus mentions this list of evil thoughts not to make us despair about ourselves, but to help us struggle against enjoying these thoughts. Instead of being super-strict about outward things like washing our hands or avoiding certain foods, we need to be super-strict about the thoughts we allow into our minds and hearts. 2 Corinthians 10:5 says, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” Clearly, in light of this verse we need to do something about our thought world. Each day, throughout the day, what do we enjoy thinking about? We may think we have a right to privacy in our thought world. We may think it doesn’t matter, if no one else knows what we’re thinking. But we can’t follow Jesus like that. We’ve got to struggle in our thought world. We’ve got to fight.

What can we do? In verse 8 Jesus suggests that we should not let go of God’s commands. Psalm 119:9–11 reads, “How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” It says we need to hide God’s word in our hearts. That’s a very personal thing. It’s like holding onto God’s words as our personal treasure. We can’t depend on someone else to do it for us; we’ve got to put our own effort into it. In day to day living, God’s word cleans out our minds and hearts of all the evil thoughts, all the bad desires, all the junk that can get in. Jesus said elsewhere that it’s his word that makes us clean (Jn15:3). So we need to get personally motivated to listen to his words, to really think about what Jesus said, even to memorize it. As we hold onto his words, the Holy Spirit begins to set us free in our thought world from the control of our sinful nature. This is why, if we’re serious about following Jesus, we need to spend quality personal time in his word. If we neglect his word, our hearts become like a neglected field full of weeds, thorns and garbage.

But even with all our sincere effort, it’s not enough to have real inner purity. 1 John 1:7–9 reads, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” According to these verses, to have real inner purity we need to come into the light and resolve to walk in the light. Since Jesus is the light, this means to come to Jesus and follow him. When we sincerely come to Jesus, it’s the starting point of having real fellowship with one another. Also, as we come to Jesus, his blood begins to purify us from all sin. We need to put our faith in his shed blood, because only his blood can really purify us. Hebrews 9:14 says, “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God!” We need to put our faith not in what we can do, but in his blood (Ro3:25a). And, instead of stubbornly defending ourselves and claiming our own righteousness, we need to confess our sins. When we humbly confess our sins, God promises through Jesus to purify us from all unrighteousness. No matter who we are, if we start neglecting God’s word and neglect struggling against our sins, then our hearts become just like Jesus’ description in verses 21–23. People may not notice, but God does.

In the second part of today’s passage we see a woman who’s a sharp contrast to the hypocritical and legalistic Pharisees. She’s not even Jewish; she’s a Gentile. But her heart is not full of selfishness, arrogance and folly, but full of humility, wisdom and love. She breaks all the rules and comes to Jesus on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter. When Jesus tests her, suggesting that she’s not worthy of his help and just a Gentile dog, she passes his test with flying colors. She humbly admits she’s a dog and asks for just crumbs. It shows her faith. And Jesus immediately responds by healing her daughter. As we struggle to come to Jesus and have a genuinely holy inner life, we start to resemble this woman—full of faith and full of love.

Today Jesus taught us about inner purity. Let’s read verses 14,15 again. In 2016 may God move our hearts to pursue inner purity.