

Listen and Understand



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Jesus had two ways of social inter-action with people. One was of a friendly and social nature, in a friend-to-friend kind of way, with an agreeable attitude of mind, and a graciously compassionate heart. But while some gladly received Him and listened closely to what He said, there were many who were wealthy, of the nobility and religiously educated, who stood opposed to Him. They were always ready to trap Him in His talk and find something to accuse Him of. It was for this latter group that Jesus reserved His strictest judgment.

In fact that same heart attitude of hypocrisy hasn't changed one bit in the last 2,000 years. Indeed we can expect this religious mindset will probably increase as His return draws closer, because the enemy will attempt to divert our focus from his evil work, by inciting us to criticise the brethren. Let's look at how Jesus dealt with the obvious hypocrisy of the religiously minded.

The Pharisees Accuse

Mark 7:1-13

- 1-2 **The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. They noticed that some of His disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is without washing them.**
- 3-4 **(The Pharisees and indeed all the Jewish people don't eat unless they wash their hands properly, following the tradition of their elders. They don't eat anything from the marketplace unless they dip it in water. They also observe many other traditions, such as the proper washing of washing cups, jars, brass pots, and dinner tables.)**
- 5 **So the Pharisees and the scribes asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders? Instead, they eat with unclean hands."**

- 6-7 He told them, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it is written, 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is worthless, because they teach human rules as doctrines.'
- 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."
- 9 Then He told them, "You have such a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your own tradition!
- 10-12 For Moses said, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and 'Whoever curses his father or mother must certainly be put to death.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or mother, "Whatever support you might have received from me is Corban," (that is, an offering to God) 'you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.'
- 13 You are destroying the word of God through your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many other things like that."

The Pharisees had laid great stress on outward ritual and performance. They followed endless detailed rules, some say around 365 of them – one for each day of the year.

For example one of their most publicly displays of pride concerned their ritual ablutions (verse 4 above). Eating without washing the hands was considered ceremonially unclean. The phrase literally means to do it "*diligently, carefully, painstakingly with serious attention to detail.*" So much so, that there was great debate among the Pharisees whether you washed your hands by just dipping fingers, or washing up to the wrist only, while others said even up to the elbows!

So long as their followers were careful in the minor observances, they were generally allowed to ignore the greater matters of the Law. It's true that the law of Moses required external cleanness (Lev 15:11) especially for some hygienic reasons, but when it was for ceremonial purposes it was not for its own sake. Rather it was to signify how careful God's people should be to purify their minds from moral pollution. It was an outward action or sign of a deeper inner purpose.

Jesus gives a parable

Mark 7:14-16

- 14-16 Then Jesus called to the crowd again and told them, "**Listen to me all of you, and understand! Nothing that goes into a person from the outside can make him unclean. It's what comes out of a person that makes a person unclean. If anyone has ears to hear, let him listen!**"

Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and publicly exposes their hypocrisy to the crowd. He says to the onlookers; "**Listen to me and understand!**" (verse 14). The word "understand" literally means "*to put together, to join together in the mind*". Jesus was making a particularly important statement here. He expected the crowd to be able to work out the difference between what the Pharisees said and what He said. They could do it; it didn't take brains. Jesus wasn't being condescending, but He was encouraging His hearers to make a clear distinction between what He was declaring as truth and freedom, and what the hypocrites were stating as ritualism and control.

This was an ongoing battle between the divine mind of Christ and the carnal mind of fallen man. It still happens and will still continue right up to the very End. Spiritual perception by the Holy Spirit is one of our most powerful tools in recognising how the enemy acts and how fallen man thinks. Those who don't learn these lessons well, will be open game for the deceitful workings of the Antichrist when he appears (2 Thess 2:3).

The natural tendency of the human heart is to twist God's ways, and Jesus attacked this attitude head on when dealing with the Pharisees (see vs 6). He used a quote from Isaiah, "**Their heart is far from me**" (Isaiah 29:13). Hypocrites always try to put others in bondage to their own ideas and practices.

They also uncharitably attack anyone who doesn't conform to them, even in little things. In fact this is one of the key indicators that a person is driven by the Pharisaic mindset, so watch out for it.

However, in the life of godly holiness, everything depends on the control of our thoughts. Wise Solomon wrote, **"As a man thinks in his heart, so he is"** (Proverbs 23:7), and **"Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life."** (4:23).

In fact, Jesus put "evil-thoughts" in the same category as an evil heart. The Lutheran pastor Jacob Boehme wrote, "All depends on what I set my imagination upon." So, our constant prayer should be, **"Create in me a clean heart oh God"** (Psalm 51:10). It will help to act as a defence against being too arrogant and hypocritical.

The Disciples Chastised

Mark 7:17-23

- 17-19 **When Jesus had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach and is eliminated?" (So He declared all foods clean.)**
- 20-23 **And He said, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."**

The disciples queried Jesus about the parable of verse 15, despite what He said to the crowds in verse 14. He seems to accuse the disciples; **"Are you so lacking in understanding. Do you not understand?"** (vs 18).

There are two different words here for "*understand*", and both are different from what Jesus said to the crowds in verse 14, where He said, **"Listen to me and understand"**.

The first word and phrase in verse 18 means "*without any intelligence; foolish*".

The second phrase in the same verse means "*cannot perceive and see; unable to ponder*".

So it's as if He said to the disciples (and us?), "Are you without any intelligence in this matter, and so foolish. Can't you see and perceive what's going on, unable to think it through?" (My paraphrase).

Jesus seems to charge the disciples with spiritual and even intellectual dullness. Why was He seemingly so abrupt with them? To be fair we must never forget that the disciples lived in a Pharisaic environment. By and large their religious worldview was Pharisaic. We also need to be alert about this in our modern world with all its cultural views. However Jesus made a strong point, **"To you (the disciples) it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them (the crowds) it has not been granted."** (Matthew 13:11).

So we *should* be able to perceive and get a grip on understanding how the heart of man and a hypocritical mind works. And Jesus makes the clear statement that there's no method (psychologically or otherwise) that we can use to understand how it all operates, because it's a mystery pertaining to kingdom people, granted by the Father so that none of us can boast of being ultra-spiritual (13:11).

For God's people, there's a special grace given in order to "understand". Here Jesus explains that His parables are open to the disciples but shut to the Pharisees because of their hostile minds and the hypocritical nature of their heart. The truths and things of the kingdom can only be known by revelation from the Father. How blessed then are we!

- **“I praise You Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.”** (Matthew 11:25)

Meek and teachable hearts will always know the ways of God. Let us draw near to our great teacher the Holy Spirit, asking Him to make us know the heart of the Word of God. This will be increasingly vital as the End Times gather momentum.

To Summarise

Scripture tells us there are two sources of spiritual pollution; one from Satan, the other from the heart of fallen mankind (both of course are linked). Jesus warns us of three particular dangers: **(1)** The external practice of religion, **(2)** lip service without a heart, and **(3)** routine unthinking repetition.

Here we see that hypocrisy is not only what you say but also how you act. It’s an incredibly sad and disturbing thing that people can seem to actually become addicted to false religious practices, and find false comfort in them, all the while not realising the hypocrisy that goes with it.

The accompanying sickness that goes with hypocrisy is complacency. When hypocrisy takes root in a religious person, the mind and spirit of that person becomes seared and unable to discern what’s going on inwardly. Deep down they probably are quite aware of the hypocrisy but find it easier to rely on external rituals, and seemingly spiritual sayings that are really just “clouds without water”, rather than walk obediently each day with God.

Outward acts of piety and spiritual sayings and clichés are in fact easier to do than obeying and walking with God. Jesus requires a high standard of obedience in our walk: **“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”** (Matthew 5:20). But note this is not about being super-spiritual and falling back into the trap of “works”. It’s about understanding (that word again) what the Father requires, and how we are able (by the Holy Spirit working in us) to discern the difference between superficial godly living and that which is deep in the sanctified heart.

Be wary of such insidious things, but above all be grateful that we have been, and will continue to be led into all truth (John 16:13), so that we can comprehend the wondrous ways of our Lord and God.

**“That we may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is
the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge,
that you may be filled up to ALL the fullness of God.”**

(Eph 3:18-19)

May our hearts, minds and actions increasingly understand the Father’s workings and conform to His ways.

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