

DESCENDING INTO GREATNESS

“It’s What’s Inside That Counts”

I don’t think I’m saying anything new when I suggest that our culture is obsessed with appearance. We may laugh at a woman so superficial that Dr. Phil has to send her on a literally blind date to help her see past the surface, but let’s be honest with each other, just this once. Who here hasn’t asked for a photo first before agreeing to be set up on a blind date? I have.

We wear suits to job interviews because you never get a second chance to make a first impression. One interviewer confided in me that three characteristics he looks for before even considering someone for a job are neat hair, trim fingernails and polished shoes. It tells him little about a person’s character, competency or commitment to team play but he won’t hire without it.

Our culture is obsessed with weight loss and fitness, but not with health. If we truly cared deeply about our health, television ads would urge us to join a gym and inspire us exercise so that we could live longer and protect our heart. Instead, TV warns us that beach season is almost here and if you don’t get in shape now, you’ll end up embarrassing yourself this summer.

The marketing industry depends on our superficial fascination with appearance. I was out for coffee once with a friend who works in the media industry. In the course of conversation, I said to him, “Obviously you can’t judge a book by its cover.” “Considering the sophistication of modern marketing,” he said in all seriousness, “if you can’t, somebody should be fired.”

We pick our political leaders based on externals. In his new book, *Politics Lost*, Joe Klein notes that way back in 1968 Roger Ailes, Richard Nixon’s presidential campaign stage manager, predicted that following that year, elections would essentially be won or lost on television, meaning that presidential candidates will more and more have to be performers. As they say, image is everything.

As we turn to Mark 7, what we discover is that Jesus himself was very disturbed by the way our superficial

concern with keeping up appearances can even sneak into our life of faith.

Mark 7:1-2, 5 [NIV] — The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed... So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"

When news of the kind of ministry that Jesus had been performing in Galilee, the most northerly province in Israel, reached the ears of the leaders of the Jewish religion in the capital of Jerusalem, they sent an official delegation of representatives to investigate the teachings of this apparently radical rabbi a little further. What they saw, Mark says, bothered them deeply.

What they saw was that Jesus and his disciples ate with unwashed hands. On the surface, this sounds like just another round in the eternal battle between mothers and their seven-year-old sons—“Wash your hands before you come to the table!” It’s just a good idea; a matter of basic hygiene, especially when you consider that in ancient Israel, everyone at the table ate from the same dish. To the religious officials, this debate held a much deeper spiritual significance. Jesus and his disciples had violated the laws of religious purity according to the traditions of the faith.

It wasn’t that Jesus and the disciples had violated the Scriptures. The Law only mandated that priests perform ritual washings before serving in the Temple. However, the Pharisees were eager to see everyone and everything be as holy, pure, and acceptable to God as a priest in the Temple. Therefore, they zealously took the Scriptural rules for the temple purity of priests and elaborated on them for everyman, developing an elaborate system of rules and regulations that interpreted and applied the concept of ritual washings for every person everywhere in every conceivable situation. Their commentary on the Law, the Mishnah, devotes twelve full chapters, more than 250 pages, to describing the rituals for washing cups, pitchers, kettles, hands and other objects to maintain religious purity in every situation. Chapter 11 was devoted exclusively to the practices and procedures of hand-washing because hands contract ritual impurity faster and easier than germs or a cold virus. There were regulations to govern which situations required what forms of washing, how much water was to be used, and the proper orientation of the hands.

The entire process was meant to promote holiness in Israel by describing the practices of purity that were assumed to guarantee that a person was acceptable to God. Every command was expanded upon and extended in application to make the Law more relevant, easier to understand and easier to apply to everyday life. They called it “building a fence around the Law”. They would surround the Bible with layers and layers of interpretation and application to move back the boundaries prescribed by the Scriptures to keep people further away from sin. If the rule was, “Don’t touch this book,” the Pharisees would say, “Don’t touch this fence,” or “Don’t stand on the stage,” or “Don’t enter the auditorium,” or “Stay away from church;” believing that if people faithfully observed the traditions, they would never break the Law and sin. That’s why they enforced their religious rules and regulations more strictly and rigorously than the Bible.

People were assumed to be faithful to God whenever they were observed following the Pharisaic religious traditions. They were considered to be sinning whenever the traditions were ignored and were judged harshly for it, which is why the Pharisees were so deeply offended when they saw Jesus’ disciples not playing by their rules. They just couldn’t stand the thought of people behaving in such an ignorant and “unholy” way. They had transformed faith into a series of religious rituals, defining spiritual success as external obedience to religious tradition.

This is exactly where churches have behaved like Pharisees. Church people like to think about Pharisees in the Bible as the bad guys, but in effect the Pharisees were the first-century equivalent of church people. Just like the Pharisees, the church’s goal has always been to help people become better followers of Jesus. As a result, it has historically expended an enormous amount of energy interpreting and applying biblical teachings for modern life, transforming vague biblical ideas into more specific and helpful rules so that people can see what obedience looks like with skin on and so people can more clearly see what sin is.

The church does this all the time, interpreting and applying the principles of Scripture for everyday life, transforming them into hard and fast, spoken or unspoken rules by which we judge people’s lives. We do it with sin

issues. The Bible says, “Don’t get drunk,” so, to protect people from sin, we say, “Don’t drink.” The Bible says, “Your body is a temple,” so, to protect people from sin, we say, “Don’t smoke.” The Bible says, “Don’t associate with rebels,” so the rule is, “Don’t associate with anybody who dyes their hair funky colours and has tattoos or multiple piercings.” We do it with obedience issues. The Bible says, “God’s word is a lamp to my feet,” so we say, “Read your Bible every day.” The Bible says, “Give thanks to the Lord.” So we say, “You have to say a long grace at every meal even in a busy restaurant when everybody is watching and the server is standing right there and your food is getting cold.” With our new rules firmly in place, we transform the Christian life into a parade of human traditions, so we can judge spiritual success based on people’s conformity to religious externals.

It is was exactly this, a faith of religious externals, based on invented human traditions, what drove Jesus absolutely crazy whenever he dealt with the Pharisees.

Mark 7:6-7 [TNIV] — [Jesus] replied, “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. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

I don’t think that what really got under Jesus’ skin was that the Pharisees interpreted and applied the teachings of Scripture to all people everywhere. I don’t think that Jesus was upset that they were interested in promoting holiness everywhere. I think that what bothered Jesus is that in the process, the human traditions became more important than the biblical teachings and religious externals became more important than what was going on inside people’s hearts.

According to Jesus, that made them hypocrites, not because they said one thing and did another but because their biggest concern was with keeping up appearances by living out the letter of their religious traditions. They were spiritual posers, actors on a religious stage. Their focus on religious externals made them performers merely playing the part of a faithful Jew. As a result, God was ignoring their worship because it was empty, hollow, and insincere. It was just a big show of religious devotion without any substance. Their goal was to faithfully execute all the right religious externals, but they never gave God what he really wanted, their hearts.

For example, the Pharisees had developed an elaborate series of rules to prescribe the right way to dedicate possessions (houses, land or flocks) to the Temple to be used for God's purposes. To dedicate my house to God, I simply declare it "Corban" (which means "gift" in Hebrew). As a result, the title and deed would transfer to the church, presumably when I died, and from then on the house could be used only for ministry purposes. One of the major benefits of declaring an item Corban, according to Pharisaic tradition, was that it immediately rendered the item unavailable for regular use because it now technically belonged to God. So, if I didn't want my in-laws living at my house, as they have for the past two weeks, all I'd have to do is declare it Corban, which would give me religious grounds to refuse to put them up. Even though God commands us to honour our fathers and mothers (even your in-laws), I had the Corban escape clause to get me off the hook. My heart was a long way from God's but my conscience was clear because I had followed religious tradition to the letter of the law. I was a hypocrite.

We have our own ways of playing exactly the same religious games with God, which makes us the same kind of spiritual posers as the Pharisees. We carefully choose our words, making sure that each one, in theory, is accurate, so that we can deliberately mislead someone and insist that, technically, we told the truth. We share our "prayer concerns" with friends as a way of passing along our juicy rumours without being guilty of gossip. We deliberately tie up our resources so that we can refuse to help someone in need without appearing ungenerous. We donate a full 10% of our income to charity so that we can send an angry message of non-support to the church. We define a Christian as someone who grew up in the church or has prayed a non-biblical "Sinner's Prayer", so that we can date people far from God with a clean conscience. In our dating relationships, we deliberate engage only in petting and oral sex, so that we can say we didn't sleep together before we were married. It's all just a big game of finding clever ways to disguise our sin behind a veneer of religious externals to hide the fact that in reality our hearts are far from God. It makes us nothing more than actors, merely spiritual posers before God. It's what happens when a life of faith is defined by religious externals, which is why, as it says on your outlines, rejecting a faith of religious externals frees me from inauthenticity with God.

In Mark 7, Jesus goes on to answer the original charge of the Pharisees, the one that sparked this whole discussion in the first place. The accusation was that Jesus' disciples were religiously impure, even sinning against God, because they failed to adhere to the Pharisaic traditions of hand-washing. Jesus' answer is simple: Rules that aimed exclusively at conforming a person's external behaviour never accomplish God's purpose, which is a change of heart.

Mark 7:14-15a [TNIV] — Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside you can defile you by going into you... For it doesn't go into your heart but into your stomach, and then out of your body.”

The religious traditions of the Pharisees were strictly addressed at the external behaviour of hand-washing in order to prevent themselves from being defiled at a physical level, from being defiled by eating food that was unclean. Jesus' answer is that a physical thing like food never defiles a person because food, the text literally says, goes into your mouth, then into your stomach and then into the toilet. It never touches the true centre of your spiritual life before God, your heart. The Bible doesn't use the word heart the way we do in English, to mean the source of emotions. When the Bible talks about the heart, it is referring to your centre, your true self, the sum total of all the thinking, feeling and choosing that goes on inside that makes you, you. The reason that something like food can't make you a sinner is that it never touches the real you.

Recently, I read an editorial in our denominational magazine, written by a pastor from B.C., that was called, “Why I Don't Drink.” In the editorial the author expounded on all the reasons that he chooses to abstain from alcohol. He cites the social carnage, abuse, violence, lost jobs, broken families, vandalism, drunk driving, addiction, dietary reasons, ill-health and death, all caused by drunkenness. I believe that these are the very reasons that God disapproves of drunkenness and says in the Bible, “Don't Get Drunk.” I believe that these are the very reasons why some people would and should choose a path of abstinence for themselves and pass that heritage along to their children. It all sounds very compelling and very biblical.

The problem is that his conclusion is not the biblical one. It isn't “Christians don't get drunk.” It's “Christians shouldn't drink.” The problem is that by publishing his opinion in a Christian magazine under the

heading “Intersection of Faith and Life”, he is suggesting that if faith and life truly intersected on the issue of alcohol, they would meet at the crossroads of abstinence, that abstinence is the best way to deal with the sins that arise because of drunkenness. Not only would Jesus say that this approach is inauthentic. He would also say it’s ineffective.

Mark 7:18, 21-23 [TNIV] — Don’t you see that nothing that enters you from the outside can defile you? For from within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile you.

Jesus’ point is that rules about things like alcohol don’t solve the problems of alcoholism. There are a lot of people who drink yet whose lives don’t spiral out of control and there are a lot of people who don’t drink but still experience social carnage, abuse, violence, lost jobs, broken families, vandalism, ill-health and death. So, it seems obvious that a religious rule promoting abstinence isn’t the answer because the problem isn’t alcohol but sin. Sin isn’t found in a brown bottle. It can’t be eliminated by pouring a liquid down the drain. Sin is found in the heart of both abstainers and imbibers and it will only be eliminated as God changes our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who gives us the desire to obey him and the power to do what he pleases him. That is why a faith of religious externals is not only inauthentic but ineffective to actually change people’s lives and why, as it says, on your outlines, rejecting a faith of religious externals frees me from ineffectiveness. It frees to get to the heart of the matter, which is always a matter of the heart, instead of getting bogged down trying to be a better person by following religious rules.

The other problem that Jesus has with a faith based on religious externals is that this kind of faith often degenerates into a spirit of judgmentalism and intolerance towards people who don’t endorse your specific religious rules and regulations. You can hear it in the Pharisee’s original accusation against Jesus’ disciples. It is a tone that is judgmental and arrogant.

Mark 7:5 [TNIV] — So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

That’s what naturally happens when a life of faith degenerates into a systemized set of religious rules and regulations to govern every area of life. There is a tendency towards social exclusion that immediately sets in. It was

the Pharisees way. It was why they criticized Jesus for eating with “tax collectors and sinners”. People who didn’t adhere to the religious standard should be avoided at all costs. That was the rule. People who had the nerve to not adhere to the religious traditions were immediately judged as sinners and made to be outsiders, unfit for the presence of God and disciplined or ignored. By and large, it still is the tendency in the church. As the old church rhyme says, “We don’t drink or dance or smoke or chew *or hang around with those that do.*” Judgementalism is the natural expression of a religious mindset.

Last fall, our church was visited by a prominent pastor from the Niagara region. As he walked through the doors of the church into the lobby, he was greeted by one of our pastors, who asked him how he was doing. In response, he looked around and said, “I don’t see very many ties or Bibles around here!” Seventy-five minutes later, as he emerged from the service, he bumped into one of our elders who asked him how he was doing. In response, he looked around and said, “I don’t see very many ties or Bibles around here!” Now, I’d bet his real values were good. He probably just wanted us to give God our best, as he deserves, and to grow in our understanding of God’s word, which is critical to living the Christian life. It’s what happened next that doesn’t sit well. With good values at heart, he decided on some external religious rules that express those values. Giving God our best involves dressing our best for God and what could be better than a tie? Growing in understanding God’s word involves reading the Bible, which can’t be done without carrying one of your own. Then he judged us for no ties and Bibles.

The irony was that the service this pastor attended was the service where hundreds of us nailed our sins to the cross. If you were here, you remember it. On that morning, a man named Craig Taylor, an older, hippie-type wearing a ponytail but no tie, holding a slip of black paper but no Bible, bowed his head and accepted Jesus as his personal Saviour. Later this morning, Craig is going to be baptized as a believer in Jesus Christ because that morning, he finally got God’s message of forgiveness and life change and that morning he gave God the very best he had, his life. But this pastor missed it because he couldn’t see past the end of his religious rules.

Right after Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees, Mark says he took a retreat, a weekend getaway from

ministry, escaping Israel into the Gentile territory of the city of Tyre. As soon as he arrived, one of the locals sought him out and threw themselves at his feet seeking his help. It was someone who was missing every one of the Pharisees' religious markers that would indicate that they were acceptable to God. This person was an Arab, born in Syria. They lived in Tyre, a city that was notoriously called the arch-enemy of Israel. She was a woman, seeking help from a rabbi, who traditionally only dealt with men. She was a Greek, someone who had participated in all the aspects of Greek culture that the Jews tried to shun. She was religiously unclean because of contact with her daughter, who was possessed by an evil spirit. According to the Pharisees, with their focus on religious externals, there would have been no good reason on the planet for Jesus to engage in a conversation with her. In fact, it would have been taboo for him to do so.

Yet, what really struck Jesus, as he dialogued with this Greek Syrian woman from Tyre, was her humility and the depth of her faith in him. In the end, he healed her daughter because of her faith. Because Jesus was able to do what we so rarely do well in the church and look past the troubling religious externals that would ordinarily exclude a person from the community he was able to touch a person who otherwise would have been left out in the cold. I chatted one morning with someone here at the Ridge, a rough looking guy with tattoos and piercings and wild-looking hair who said to me that they were so thankful for our church because when they walked down the aisle, people interacted with him as though he really belonged here. That's the benefit of being able break out of a faith of religious externals. It freed me from intolerance

After almost two weeks of watching my father-in-law renovate my house, I've learned something about the different approaches to redecorating an old home. The one approach, the one modeled by the previous owners, we discovered as we stripped away layers and layers of wallpaper, only to uncover crack after crack in the plaster, each more desperate for repair than the last. The other way, insisted upon by my father-in-law, demanded that we keep doing the hard work of stripping that wallpaper, exposing those cracks and closing them in. The first approach was one of superficial solutions and quick fixes, focusing on external appearances. Laying wallpaper one layer over top

of the last meant that the house always looked great on the surface so that no one would ever see the broken and crumbling mess underneath. The second approach is messier and more difficult, where things get worse before they get better. It is a shameless, humiliating approach that leaves cracks exposed and in a state of semi-repair for days at a time. But, in an approach that cares about restoration more than decoration, things do get better. Because it gets to the heart of the issue rather than just dealing in externals, things get better, the house experiences wholeness, perhaps for the first time in decades.

In Mark 7 there are two competing visions of the life of faith, one represented by the Pharisees, the other by Jesus. The one focuses on the externals, on meticulously keeping up religious appearances. In this vision, religious life means being a slave to human traditions, measuring success by a façade of faithfulness to religious rules, and judging other human books by their covers. The other focuses on the internals of faith, on how God changes us on the inside. It is a messier and more difficult vision of the life of faith. It doesn't hide the brokenness that lies beneath. It emphasizes relationships rather than rules. It is focused on the approval of God rather than the approval of others. It is also a more liberating and joy-filled vision of the life of faith. There is fearlessness towards the opinions of others, a freedom from the chains of religious tradition. There is instead the power that comes from following in Jesus' footsteps and the joy of being in a relationship with God. That's why we don't get all hung up about religious externals, because religion is only skin deep, but a relationship with God is from the heart.

