

## WHY ARE YOU DIRTY?

Mark 6:53-7:23; Psalm 51; Isaiah 29

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Take a moment to make a “List of Shame,” by writing down any memories of things you have done, or things done to you, that leave you feeling humiliated or dirty. What are you most ashamed of? List them out here:

### LIST OF SHAME

I suspect that we often behave in ways that result from what’s written on our Lists of Shame:

- **Avoidance.** Sometimes we *avoid* certain people or places or situations, because of something embarrassing that happened in the past.
- **Fatalism.** There are sins we continue to commit, knowing them to be wrong, but we do them anyways thinking, “Why not? What’s done is done. I’ve already messed up my life, there’s no turning back.”
- **Judgmentalism.** We *judge* others who do certain things, because deep inside we’re ashamed of having done those same things in the past.
- **Laxity.** Sometimes we’re *soft* on sin in others close to us, because we’re also guilty of the same sins.

More often than not, when I respond to some situation in one of these ways (avoidance, fatalism, judgmentalism, or laxity), it's not so much a response to the situation itself, but rather a knee-jerk reaction to my own history, i.e. to what's written on my List of Shame. This is a terrible way to live, as a slave to past sins.

Mark 6:53-7:23 is an invitation to freedom. We're dirty people, living in a dirty world. But Jesus has the power to make everything clean again. The List of Shame is your dirty list. Give it to Jesus. He will stamp it "CANCELLED," freeing you from its bondage.

## 1. THE NEW DIRTY: DON'T BE DISTRACTED BY IT. Mark 7:1-13

If we're ever going to come clean with Jesus, we first have to get real about our own dirt. However, Satan has a very clever way of keeping us distracted, by getting us to fret over the wrong things:

- "Most merciful God, I confess to you that I have purchased those things which are not labelled "Fair Trade;"
- I have left unrecycled those things which I ought to have recycled;
- I have eaten those things that are not organic and which I ought not to have eaten;" etc.

Let's call these distractions "the new dirty." The truth is that I could have *filled* my List of Shame with the sins of the new dirty. I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't be conscientious consumers and healthy eaters; we should. But Satan wins when he keeps us so busy with the sins of the new dirty that we never have time to consider all the true dirt deep within our hearts.

In truth "the new dirty" is a bit of a misnomer, because it's actually as old as the ages. The sins of the new dirty change with the times, but the concept has been around since before the time of Jesus. This is what Jesus was so angry about in his encounter with the Pharisees and Scribes in Mark 7. The Pharisees had come up with an elaborate set of requirements to keep clean in their culture, and anyone who didn't abide by these requirements was marked among the (new) dirty.

Already in Mark's Gospel the Pharisees had condemned Jesus for "breaking the Sabbath" because he healed the man with the injured hand.<sup>1</sup> Already they had accused Jesus of being in the service of Satan because Jesus was able to heal people of demonic possession.<sup>2</sup> In Mark 7, for a third time they condemned Jesus and his disciples, this time for uncleanness. Were they right this time? Was Jesus really dirty?

Indeed, Jesus *had* been eating with "dirty" people like tax-collectors and riffraff. But nowhere in the Bible does it say that this is wrong. In fact, there are important counterexamples throughout the Bible. Likewise, he *had* touched many "dirty" people, like the sick and the dead and the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 3:1-6.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 3:22.

demon-possessed. But as soon as he touched them, he made them well, which meant that they were no longer unclean.

No, by this point in Mark's Gospel, we know that the Pharisees will find fault with Jesus regardless of what he says and does. Why? Because they've hardened their hearts against him, and are looking for a way to put him to death.<sup>3</sup>

The issue in Mark 7:1-23 wasn't that Jesus's disciples were breaking the Old Testament law. They weren't. Jesus and his disciples were observant Jews; they kept kosher. But the Old Testament Law wasn't good enough for the Pharisees. They were concerned about "the new dirty:" certain practices *they had developed* on the basis of the Old Testament, which are listed out in 7:3-4.

The Pharisees asked (in 7:5) why Jesus' disciples didn't keep their traditions. As usual, Jesus didn't answer their question. Instead, he sharply rebuked them for their hypocrisy, quoting from Isaiah 29. Jesus applied Isaiah's stinging rebuke directly to these scribes and Pharisees in 7:6-7. What Jesus was implying here was that the Pharisees were engaged in a kind of spiritual shell game, a deceptive piety to make themselves look good while at the same time freeing them from the harder work of being right with God. They were merely keeping up appearances. Jesus hates this kind of falsehood. Like the prophets of old, he wants to expose these religious hypocrites and bring their deception into the light.

Jesus goes on in 7:9-13 to describe another even more absurd example. One of the foundations of the Old Testament moral code is honoring father and mother. It's part of the Ten Commandments and undergirds the whole narrative of the Bible. But the Pharisees developed an elaborate way to circumvent even this most foundational principle of Jewish faith and culture. In that day, declaring something as "corban" was akin to our tax loopholes associated with deferred giving, i.e. designating something for charity at one's death, but benefitting from it until then. However, corban was used *not* as a way to protect your assets from government taxation, but rather to keep them from needy relatives. It was a way to dedicate something to God, but then keep it so that nobody else could have it.<sup>4</sup> In 7:13, Jesus critiqued the "corban declaration" as another deceptive practice that in fact trumped and nullified the Word of God.

The ritual cleansings of 7:1-8 and the "corban declaration" of 7:9-13 were all part of the Pharisees' elaborate system—what Jesus calls "the traditions of men," aka the "new dirty." The implicit threat of the new dirty is that you'll be shamed if you don't abide by these new traditions. You can find similar pressures in every culture, including ours. And this strikes me as ironic, because we live in a culture that claims to be free of traditions. We've left so-called archaic moralism behind, and entered into a new, wonderful age of autonomy and freedom. Yet for all the claims of freedom, I don't see it. We're all tradition bound in one way or another. If you're not following God's word, then you're going to be subject to the traditions of men, being more

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 3:5-6.

<sup>4</sup> It's ironic how the Pharisees were so hot about Jesus befriending tax collectors, when they were the ones who were most like the IRS!

concerned with “the new dirty” than the true dirt deep within your heart. You’ll be more concerned about eating a Big Mac than about slandering your coworker.<sup>5</sup>

It’s not that the culture of previous generations was moralistic, but now our culture isn’t. Our culture is every bit as moralistic as past generations. The difference is that our contemporary moralism is keeping up with the times. It’s socially acceptable moralism. It’s okay to shame someone for not recycling, or for shopping at Walmart, which then serves as a smokescreen to keep us distracted from the True Dirt.

## 2. THE TRUE DIRT: WE NEED TO BE CLEANSED OF IT. Mark 7:14-23

In 7:14-15 Jesus shines a spotlight on the problem: we are preoccupied with surface dirt rather than the corruption deep within our hearts. It’s not what goes into a person but what comes out.

Jesus’ teaching on the heart, which started earlier in Mark’s Gospel, culminates here in Mark 7:14-23. Let’s review what we’ve already seen in earlier chapters.

First, the Pharisees had heart trouble. When Jesus healed the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12, the Pharisees didn’t like it because their hearts were hard.<sup>6</sup> Again, in the Capernaum Synagogue when Jesus healed the man with the withered hand, the Pharisees opposed him because their hearts were hard.<sup>7</sup> As a result of Jesus’ healing ministry on the Sabbath, the Pharisees joined forces with Herod, an unclean Gentile, in order to put Jesus to death.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the disciples also had heart trouble. When Jesus walked on the water in Mark 6:45-52, the disciples didn’t recognize Jesus because their hearts were hard.<sup>9</sup> As Matthew Mason warned us in his sermon on this passage, this may be the reason why we, too, don’t encounter Jesus when we gather for worship.

In Mark 7:1-23, Jesus drives this theme home. First, in 7:6 he quotes from Isaiah 29 that “their *hearts* are far from me.” Then in the final paragraph he says that what enters a person doesn’t pass into the *heart* but the stomach (7:19), but on the other hand, what comes out of a person flows from his or her *heart* (7:21).

We’re often confused and distracted by whatever the latest sins of the new dirty may be. But for Jesus, the problem is perfectly obvious. It’s a matter of the heart. It turns out that a lot of the dirt in our hearts is stuff that our culture isn’t that concerned about. But regardless of what our culture says, the True Dirt in our hearts is what we’re really guilty of. The True Dirt in our hearts

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<sup>5</sup> Absolution: drink 10 kale smoothies and do a master cleanse for a week.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 2:6, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 3:5.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 3:6.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 6:52.

is what we're really ashamed of—or at least we should be.<sup>10</sup> In Mark 7:21-22, Jesus provides us with a list of six evil appetites, followed by six evil attitudes.<sup>11</sup> The first six are more sins of the body, and the next six are more sins of the tongue. He says, “For from within, evil thoughts come out of the hearts of men: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, violence; deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolhardiness.” Let’s look at these two sets of vices in turn.

First, Jesus mentions six evil appetites that end up being sins we commit with our bodies: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, violence. It’s important to remember that the dirt of, say, adultery isn’t on the outside. It’s not that the adulterer’s genitals are dirty. Indeed, Jesus would argue that you can be an adulterer without ever taking your clothes off. The source of the dirt, Jesus says, is the heart. People often confirm this by their own testimony, saying something like, “The flame was gone from our marriage, and my spouse and I just weren’t feeling it any more. That’s when I met my true soulmate.” This isn’t the language of a soft heart, but a hardened one.

When it comes to sexual sins, our culture now prides itself on its freedom. Five years ago Mary Eberstadt showed how “the moral poles of sex and food have been reversed” over a period of fifty years.<sup>12</sup> Whereas in the middle of the last century, what one ate was entirely a matter of personal taste and sexual fidelity within marriage was the cultural norm, nowadays these two have switched places and people engage in “junk sex” like they used to eat “junk food.” Do you see how the traditions of men have blinded us to the law of God? However, when we open our ears to Jesus and listen to what he has to say, his Word penetrates our hearts and convicts us of our True Dirt.

Second, Jesus describes six sins we commit with our tongues: deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride and foolhardiness. As I read these, I can’t help but think of how the Internet becomes a channel for these sins. Online comment sections and social media can be a breeding ground for deceit, and pride, and slander, and foolishness.<sup>13</sup> I suspect people feel more freedom to engage in in these kinds of sins because they think it’s relatively harmless. But if you’ve ever been on the receiving end of someone else’s slander online, you’ll know how painful this can be.

In any case, Jesus is concerned about the flow from our hearts, regardless of whether anyone else knows about it, regardless of how it affects others. And I hope that by now you’re convinced of the True Dirt in our hearts. Jesus sees it—and us—clearly. He sees how bent we are under the weight of sin. He sees how often we respond with avoidance or fatalism, judgementalism or laxity, all in reaction to what’s on our List of Shame.

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<sup>10</sup> See Romans 1 for a diagnosis of why we can become numb to the True Dirt in our hearts.

<sup>11</sup> In the original Greek, it’s easy to distinguish these two groups because the first six are plural nouns, and the second six are singular nouns.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Eberstadt, “[Is Food the New Sex?](#)” *Policy Review*. 153. January 27, 2009. Cf. George F. Will, “[Prudes at Dinner, Gluttons in Bed.](#)” *The Washington Post*. February 26, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> I’ve heard many people say that they’ve given up Facebook because of the envy that it fostered within them.

### 3. JESUS DIED FOR YOU. WHY ARE YOU STILL DIRTY?

In Mark 5:25-34, Jesus healed a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. Everyone in Capernaum knew her, and most everyone probably responded to her with fear and disgust rather than compassion. She was always bleeding, which made her always unclean, and everyone avoided her. Nevertheless, she had heard what Jesus had done for the demon-possessed man, and the paralyzed man, and the man with the withered hand, so when he returned to Capernaum, she pushed her way through the crowds until she could just touch Jesus' cloak. And instantly she was healed. Without Jesus even saying a word, healing power flowed out of him and into her. Whereas what the Pharisees would have said was that the woman had made Jesus unclean, what actually happened was that Jesus' cleanliness flowed from him into her. And after she had fallen down in worship before him, Jesus dismissed her saying, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."<sup>14</sup>

This is what Jesus will do for you if you will reach out to him and make contact. Worship him, give him your life, and not only will he make you clean, but he will also make you his son or daughter, adopting you into God's own family.

In Mark 6:56, Jesus extends the same ministry to people throughout the region. The woman who touched Jesus in Mark 5 opened the floodgates for cleansing. Now everyone who touches Jesus is cleansed and healed. Instead of their dirt being contagious, Jesus has a "contagious holiness." Everyone is coming to him and being healed.

How about you? Think about your List of Shame. Are you really able to cancel it yourself? Can you make the shame disappear? Can you be truly clean apart from God? Reach out to Jesus and make contact. Worship him, and he will make you clean.

Perhaps you think that you're too far gone. One of the greatest lies of Satan is that you've crossed the line in some area of your life and now you're unredeemable. Maybe its one of these sins listed in 7:21-22, or maybe its something else. But you've become a fatalist, convinced that what's done is done. You've already messed up your life too much, and there's no turning back. If you think about it, this is pure nonsense. Your sins are no match for God's grace. He completely redeemed cowards and traitors and murderers and adulterers in the Bible—do you really think that he can't redeem you? This kind of fatalism is a twisted form of pride, the kind of pride that keeps people from getting the help they need and becoming the people God has called them to be.

On Maundy Thursday we'll remember Jesus wrapping himself in a towel and washing his disciples' feet.<sup>15</sup> Jesus says to Peter, "If you won't let me wash you, then you won't have any part of me." The same is true today. But if you'll let Jesus wash you, you'll be truly clean.

After Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he offered his disciples the Last Supper, inviting them to feast on his body and blood. With this he pointed them to the cross, to that turning point in

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<sup>14</sup> Mark 5:34.

<sup>15</sup> John 13.

history, when Jesus bled and died to make us clean. Every time we eat the bread and drink from the cup, we remember Jesus' sacrificial death for us, and we reclaim the cleansing that he purchased for us on the cross. Every time we partake of the Lord's Supper together, we are reminded that Jesus has taken our List of Shame and stamped it CANCELLED. Just as on Ash Wednesday, when ashes on our foreheads are a surface reminder of the dirt in our hearts, every Sunday we take elements of bread and wine and put them inside us to remind us that Jesus washes our hearts clean.

Finally, take a look at Mark 6:54-55. As soon as the people who knew Jesus recognized him, they *ran* about the whole region bringing unclean people to Jesus. It was a holiness epidemic. Instead of Jesus' people becoming contaminated, it was the very opposite. The floodgates had opened, and the river of Jesus' cleansing was flowing to everyone in the region.

So not only should we come to Jesus and be cleansed, but we also should run and get others and bring them to him. Why are we so worried about what the cultural authorities think of us? Why are we still so concerned about the traditions of men? Wherever we go *with Jesus*, he makes people clean. We can't get dirty when we bring people *to Him*. What then could possibly stop us from bringing people to him? No one is too dirty for Jesus. He died for me and you, and for them too. Why are they still dirty? Let's bring them to him. Why are you still dirty? Come to him.