



Real Obedience

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Mark 7:1-20

We commonly talk about washing our hands. We tell our children to wash up when they come inside from playing, when we call them to meals, and when they use the restroom. We wash for issues of hygiene, health, and tradition. Yet our tradition is very different from the tradition of First Century Jews regarding hand washing. They had no concept of bacteria, viruses, or single-celled parasites invisible to the naked eye. They were unconcerned with cleanliness from this standpoint. They were concerned with issues of ritual purity, of contamination from a religious or ritual perspective. It was from this perspective that Jesus argued they had missed the point of obedience. Would Jesus say the same of us?

They were involved in doing a whole host of “the right things.” They followed their traditions regarding what it meant to worship God, to obey God’s commandments, to show that they were different from the nations which surrounded them. They were not involved in idolatry. They had shed their affiliations with fertility cults generations ago on their release from Babylonian captivity. They had come to read and even memorize large portions of the Torah, God’s word with 613 commandments they attempted to follow rigorously.

If there was one word which categorized Jewish religious practice and set it apart from the actions and attitudes of other nations, it would just about have to be “obedience”. They had even worked out an arrangement with the Roman Empire with regard to the observance of Sabbath and paying appropriate tribute to Rome and sacrifice on behalf of Rome and its gods. This was no simple feat for a monotheistic religion set in the midst of a very polytheistic world.

Rome had many gods, as did the other nations. None of them thought it would matter if an adherent of one religion or nation were to bow, sacrifice, and otherwise worship the deity of another nation. In fact, the more common notion was, “the more the merrier!” There were a few issues that kept religious observance distinctive, but on the whole, religion was considered an issue of keeping the gods happy, keeping one safe from the wrath of their whims, keeping on good terms with all of the gods, lest one of them take an unhealthy interest in you. Rome was less concerned with worshipping the right gods, than with worshipping them all. In fact, they tried to keep the “real” name of their patron deity secret, lest another nation invoke to their assistance in rebellion against Rome!

Judaism ushered in a whole new reality in religious observance in the world. They Jews were called to worship, according to words attributed to Moses, a “jealous” God. Yahweh wanted the people to worship Yahweh, and only Yahweh.

In the period of the Judges, this had been problematic. Even more so, in Moses’ own day, the people were trying to serve several gods at once, hoping somehow to “stack the deck” of divine favor in their best interest. Under Samuel and David, the worship of Yahweh took its more rightful place in Israel, as the people began to serve Yahweh alone much more uniformly, but that was more for show than reflecting a change in heart for all the nation.

As soon as David and Solomon left the scene, the nation divided into two idolatrous camps, Ba’al worship returned with vigor, and Yahweh was set to the side as one god among others.

All that changed with the ministries of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the exile to Babylon. It was in that experience of finding themselves ripped out of their homeland that this nation would return with a newly discovered reverence for Yahweh as the only true God, the only God for the Jewish people to worship, and the only God worthy of being considered deity.

The nation returned from exile and left their idols behind. The Jews re-established their nation in their homeland and began finally to put into practice the ideals of monotheistic worship to which Moses had called them generations before.

They looked at texts in Deuteronomy and judged them by very strict criteria. This was a criteria based on fear of a new exile, a newly discovered recognition that Yahweh demanded a wholly different category of dedication and worship. They took phrases like “they shall be as dangling before your eyes,” and inscribed Yahweh’s commands on tiny scrolls that might hang down in their line of vision throughout the day. They began to place menorahs on the doorposts of their homes, touching them in recognition of the commands written inside.

Obedience mark the way they walked into their homes. It marked the way they walked out into the street. Obedience marked the way they washed their foods to remove the taint of some contaminant that might be ritually impure and therefore interfere with their reception by Yahweh in worship. Obedience marked the washing of their hands to removed unknown contaminants. Obedience determined which foods they were allowed to eat in recognition that Yahweh wanted them far removed from fertility cult practices.

Obedience was their way of life. Obedience was their guide and protector. Obedience was their safety net which would keep them in the good graces of Yahweh and avoid calamity falling upon Israel.

Then Jesus steps into the picture and says it is not enough. Whoa!

The traditions of the elders was very prescriptive! It told them how often to pray, it told them what to pray, it told them what to eat, how to prepare it, how not to prepare it, how to eat it, and the steps they should undertake in getting ready to eat it, as well as the blessings associated with eating a meal and finalizing its celebration as dependent upon the blessings of Yahweh! The traditions told them how to obey God’s commands not to work on the Sabbath, what it mean not to speak falsely, and how to relate to an outsider without becoming contaminated by their presence and contact. While we may look upon these actions as culture and tradition, they regarded them as following religious instruction in the worship of Yahweh.

Walking by a mezuzah was a religious activity for a Jew. Ritual hand washing was a religious activity. Putting on the proper clothing was a religious activity. Greeting one another and being aware of what one did or did not touch was a religious activity. This was all part of their worship and reverence for Yahweh. It was part of the whole package of serving God in obedience to the commands they read and interpreted in the Torah of God’s instruction for their living. It was all about obedience.

Jesus said their obedience was insufficient. He turned to Isaiah to follow up on his challenge of Jewish religious tradition. He told them that their obedience was external. It was formal. It was false. He said that they were placing the stress in their obedience in all the wrong places.

What?! Their traditions were all about serving Yahweh and only Yahweh! It was about making sure they followed all of God’s instructions to the letter!

Jesus responded that it was never the letter of the law with which God was concerned. God was concerned with matters of one’s decisions and attitudes. God was concerned with the intent of the commandments. They were designed to teach us love and faithfulness. God was not so concerned with outward appearances, but with the attitudes of the heart which work themselves out into our actions.

We still insist our children wash their hands. It is not about keeping their hands clean, but keeping them healthy. So is God’s concern with us. God wants us to learn to live in love, forgiveness, and grace. God wants us to follow the example of Jesus--loving God and others, giving our all on behalf of others. Saying our prayer before or after the meal is not the issue. The issue is allowing God to present in our hearts and minds and actions throughout the meal and the rest of our lives.

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