

SERMON ✝ AUGUST 29, 2021
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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One of the problems with the Bible is that some people take it *too* literally. And then there are those who go even further taking their literal interpretation to new heights.

So it was Menelik II. Menelik was the emperor of Ethiopia from 1889 until 1913. He had been taught of the strength that one can get from the Bible. And so, whenever Menelik became ill, he simply ate of few pages of the Bible so that he would feel better.

His strange use of the Bible did him little harm, as long as his scriptural intake was modest. However, in December of 1913, as he was recovering from a stroke, he suddenly felt extremely ill. On his instruction, the complete book of First Kings was torn from the Bible and fed to him, page by page. He unfortunately died before he had consumed the entire book.

This, of course, is not the kind of scripture use that we would advocate. And it is a rather extreme example. But so often, throughout the years, scripture has been grossly misinterpreted and misused. And it is exactly such misuse that Jesus is confronting in today's lesson in Mark's Gospel.

The pharisees were much more interested in the form of religion than with its essence. They had allowed the rules to become more important than the message. It is a problem that still persists today and is especially troublesome as it affects our basic understanding of God.

What kinds of religious things do we worry about and about what does God wish us to be concerned?

So . . . what is important? There are those who are convinced that, if they have the right words, make the right moves, dress in the proper ways and worship in prescribed forms—God will be *obligated* to respond.

This was not an issue that suddenly originated in Jesus' day. Since the beginning of formalized religion, it has been a problem. It is what the book of Amos is all about.

There are all kinds of things that we can get hung up on in our religious lives and in the church in our own day: liturgies, Bible translations, building forms, how to dress for worship, order of lighting candles and so much more. Believe it or not . . . this stuff is not all that important.

The "heart" of the issue is simply this . . . we are suppose to change from the inside out. Whether we read the Old Testament, St. Paul or the Gospels . . . the basic concern is that people change from the inside out . . . not the reverse.

We cannot earn or deserve God's grace and merit because God loves us unconditionally. This is God's promise. To not take God at God's word is to practice non-faith. It is to be faithless to God's promise of grace and acceptance. It is to assume that God is kidding us and really doesn't mean it. It all boils down to a proper understanding of God's laws.

When the early Old Testament books were written, there was an understanding of the law as a rule of life, a spirit, a guide for life. Keeping the statutes, commandments and ordinances meant faithfully pursuing the whole of God's will in every place of life.

When the spirit of the law is made subservient to the letter of the law . . . the life goes out of religious life. The law so used becomes a trap. If we are concerned only with the details of ceremony and ritual to the point that the spirit is endangered it is a gross misunderstanding of the law.

Jesus did not come to do away with the law. What Jesus meant to do was to show the way in which, what the law meant to accomplish in the first place, could actually be done . The intent of the law would then be fulfilled.

"Okay, if I can't brown-nose my way into heaven . . . then why should I even live a good life?" Our life is our response to God. Because God has been good to us—we should be good.

We live a life worthy of God's respect, not to please God . . . but so that we can feel good about ourselves. Our response is the key. It is not our task to get God to respond to us. It is our task to respond to the call of God.

Jesus tried to tell the pharisees not to get hung up on whether the disciples washed their hands or not . . . the important thing was to feed their neighbors.

And, if you want to become passionate about your church . . . pick the right issues. Too often, like the Pharisees we tend to get bogged down in the little things and ignore the big things.

The pharisees noticed the violation of the hand washing code. And so they made note of this, yet they failed to really discern Jesus and his person and work. They never seemed to notice the people who had been helped by Jesus.

How about us? Do we see Jesus present in the need of our neighbor? Do we make a big deal, and rightly so, of the big sins like theft and murder while hardly batting an eye at the sins of envy, slander or pride?

Let us not be more concerned about clean hands than pure hearts. Let us remember that God doesn't care how we worship . . . God does care that we worship.

We may look like Christians on the outside, but what about our hearts?