

Goodness, Gracious!
[Text - Mark 7:1-15; 21]

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In First Century Israel, there was a picky and rather peculiar law, that prohibited people from eating with “defiled hands.” This doesn’t mean “dirty hands,” in terms of hygiene. Your hands could be completely spotless, yet still considered to be “defiled.” Simply washing them wasn’t good enough; there was a specific, detailed *ritual* that had to be completed for your hands to be considered “purified.” Get that ritual right, and you're good to go; get it wrong, and you're a good target for some severe and rigorous condemnation, from some seriously religious critics.

That's what's happening in this morning's New Testament reading. Some Scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem notice that Jesus' disciples fail to “purify” their hands before eating. So these Temple officials attack Jesus for not being a good rabbi - for not teaching his disciples to observe all the complex rules and traditions that had become so important to the religious establishment. But Jesus fires right back at them: “You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you, saying, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’...For you abandon the commandment of God, and hold to human tradition.” Then Jesus - good rabbi that he is - gives them a specific example of this hypocrisy.

The Fourth Commandment from Moses' Top Ten Greatest Hits is “Honor your father and mother.” This certainly includes helping care for one's parents in their later years. Yet that responsibility is neatly swept-away by a religious *tradition* of pledging one's financial support to the Temple in Jerusalem. It's called *Corban* - a kind of shady First Century Temple Tax shelter - a shrewd way of supposedly honoring ones Heavenly Parent, while treating one's aging earthly parents in a cold and uncaring manner. But Jesus will have none of this. Time and again, he teaches *and* demonstrates that people cannot honestly pledge their love and devotion to an unseen God, if they're not willing to show their love and compassion to the people of God with whom they interact every day. If we truly love our Divine Source, then we will be compelled to care for the people around us who reflect that Divine Image - especially those elderly or young, weak or vulnerable people who need our help the most.

Throughout my lifetime of involvement in the life of the Church, I've noticed that there are two polar opposites to which people of faith seem to be attracted: *legalism* and *grace*. *Legalism* points-out and picks-at what's wrong with people; while *grace* encourages and raises-up the good. Legalism constricts people's lives, because it makes them so afraid of doing something *wrong*, that they often end up doing nothing at all. Grace, on the other hand, opens-up and energizes our lives - because knowing that there is a gracious allowance for our human frailties and failings, frees us to act with boldness and compassion. Legalism is about enforcing strict rules, while *grace* is about forming sincere relationships. And perhaps most notably, religious legalism isn't just a way to try to control other people. It's essentially a way to try to control *God*; by claiming to have a direct, Divine insight into who is acceptable and worthy, and who is not. Grace, on the other hand, means trusting that the Holy Source of us all is caring, compassionate, and expansive enough to include and cherish us all!

In the person of Jesus Christ, you and I are given a perfect example of a life that overflows with Divine Grace. He consistently challenges those picky, legalistic rules and regulations that have corrupted his faith tradition. He cuts right through them, and reveals the true core of his faith: that God is Love! And if we really want to know and serve God, then we must love and serve one another. To *do* this, we may have to put-aside some of our long-held religious traditions. We will need to meet people where *they* are in their life and faith journeys. And we will need to surrender our own self-righteous impulse to judge others; and find gracious and compassionate ways to build them up, and to enhance their lives.

The Good News that Jesus Christ proclaims *and* demonstrates, is that the Holy One's primary desire is that we treat one another in ways that are kind and fair, gracious and loving. This is why Jesus is willing to do healing "work" on the Sabbath - to break the rule of Sabbath rest, in order to bring restoration to those whose lives are broken and hurting. This is why he boldly touches the "untouchable" lepers and warmly embraces society's "outcasts" - ignoring human *laws*, in order to uplift human *lives*. This is why Jesus invites you and me to worry less about religious rules and traditions, and to concentrate more on cultivating wholesome and authentic relationships with the people around us - regardless of their religious beliefs or practices!

It can be easy to find strange, strict, and even cruel laws, scattered throughout the Sacred Scriptures. The greater challenge - and the greatest treasure - is to look beyond the Letter of the Law, and to discover the gracious, Living Word of Jesus Christ:

The One who welcomes all people with open arms and an open heart.

The One who routinely breaks the rules, in order to help and heal the people.

The One who calls you and me to faithfully follow the Divine Path of compassion, forgiveness, and grace.

Fortunately, there are no laws against doing that!