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Pharisees and unclean hands.

Mark 7.1-8, 14-23 (2.9.2012)

1 Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, 2 they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders,

4 and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) 5 And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

6 And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' 8 “You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."9 And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!

10 For Moses said, 'Honour your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 11 But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)—

12 then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

14 And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: 15 There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." 17 And when he had and entered the house left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18 And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, 19 since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20 And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him.21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Jesus and his disciples were at Capernaum *‘spreading the good news’* through the healing ministry of Jesus. Biblical scholar, **Alan Cole**, points out that long before Jesus became known as *‘the Saviour’*, particularly in the Anglo-saxon period of the 5th century onwards,[[1]](#footnote-1) the popular title for Him was *‘the Healer’* .[[2]](#footnote-2)

He healed many at Capernaum: the man possessed with an unclean spirit in the synagogue[[3]](#footnote-3); Simon Peter’s mother-in-law[[4]](#footnote-4), the servant of the Roman Centurion[[5]](#footnote-5) and the paralytic man lowered through the roof [[6]](#footnote-6) are just some of the many Jesus healed there.

Mark writes however that it was at Capernaum at this particular time,[[7]](#footnote-7) there develops *“another bitter confrontation between Jesus and the leaders of the Jews”.* [[8]](#footnote-8)

Biblical commentator, William Hendriksen writes, *“Christ’s hostile critics (are) impatiently waiting for him on the western side of the Sea of Galilee* [[9]](#footnote-9) *ready for an attack”* [[10]](#footnote-10)… not a brief attack for these men were from Jewish Headquarters in Jerusalem[[11]](#footnote-11) 124 kms away and they were the *legal people* of the Talmud[[12]](#footnote-12) … Jewish officials not to be argued with.

Mark[[13]](#footnote-13) writes that when Jesus and His disciples arrived[[14]](#footnote-14) at the synagogue at Capernaum[[15]](#footnote-15), these ‘officials’ impatiently *“gathered to him”* to *watch* His every move because, by this time, Jesus was their *subversive* enemy No. 1, and they want to *incriminate* Him on the serious charge of defilment before God.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Mark writes that the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they first wash their hands, cups, pots and copper vessels - properly[[17]](#footnote-17)ie: in accordance to *“the tradition of the elders”.*

These *‘traditions of the elders’* arise from two Hebrew words, ‘**tohorah’** which is being ritually *clean* before Him: and **tum’ah** which is being ritually *unclean* before Him: nothing to do with health and hygiene[[18]](#footnote-18) but of their ritual.

These two words: **tohorah** (purity) and **tumʾah** (unclean) come from the Pentateuchal[[19]](#footnote-19) commandments that Israel—whether eating, procreating, or worshiping God in the Temple—must avoid all sources of contamination, the principal one is touching a corpse[[20]](#footnote-20) and so on.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Based on the need for purity before God, they forbid any uncircumcised man from entering the Temple because this would **defile the Temple** and the offending person faced death!

Defilement before God was **intolerable**, as Alfred Edersheim writes, *“in general, Jewish writers distinguish backward, six degrees of defilement”* ... they can go as far back to the *‘father of fathers’*, the *‘fathers’* and the *‘first’, ‘second’, ‘third’* and *‘fourth’* child.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

There was also the Levitical impurity[[23]](#footnote-23) in Palestine before the year 70AD, which is said to be a *“deliberate and consistent separation of the Jew from the Gentile (Roman) by the religious authorities of the first century.”*

After Jesus *“cleansed the Temple”* [[24]](#footnote-24)at Jerusalem, the chief Priests and the elders questioned His authority: Jesus told them they *‘knew not the scriptures or the power of God’* [[25]](#footnote-25) which was evident in their reputation of straining at *‘gnats but swallowing camels’*.

At Capernaum, the Scribes from Jerusalem asked Jesus accusatively, *“why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”* Jesus states the obvious, the *“tradition of the elders”* does not, and never would have, the same authority as the word of God as *delivered by the prophets*.

This was a leading question[[26]](#footnote-26) loaded with false guilt and to which Jesus does not answer in defense of himself or the disciples but endorses Isaiah[[27]](#footnote-27) one of the great prophet of Israel, who, 700 years earlier declared, *“these people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandents of men …”.*[[28]](#footnote-28)

Mark writes that Jesus called the people to him a **second time**, He said to them … *“hear me all of you, and understand … there is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”*

This strict adherence to the *traditions of the elders* had everything to do with ceremonial practices[[29]](#footnote-29) and nothing to do with *health and hygiene* as in the 19th century discoveries by Ignaz Semmelweis and Joseph Lister.[[30]](#footnote-30)

It is clear that *“most Pharisees and Scribes hated Jesus”* [[31]](#footnote-31) because:

He *did not honour* their traditions.

He *associated with publicans, prostitutes tax-collectors and sinners.*

He rubbed shoulders with *Samaritans*, [[32]](#footnote-32)

and He claimed to be the Son of God.

So powerful and heavy-laden was the teachings of the Pharisees, later on in the house at Capernaum[[33]](#footnote-33) the disciples asked Him to explain again what he said: again … surprised, Jesus explains the simple fact that what goes into the mouth does not enter the heart but the stomach … whereas, *“out of the heart come the evil thoughts regarding sexual immorality, theft, murder, coveting, wickedness, deceit, envy, slander, pride, foolishness and aggression … it is these things* ***defile a person from within****.”*

Basic to the Pharisees was their historical belief that Israel was taken captive by the Babylonians[[34]](#footnote-34) because ***they sinned against God*** by breaking the law of Moses.

To avoid this ever happening again, they wanted to ensure Israel remained *‘pure’* before God. Accordingly, they worked out that the law of Moses contained 613 commandments - 248 positive *"you shall"* and 365 negative *"you shall not"* and these *‘shall not’* was their focal point.

To protect people from breaking the law through ***ignorance or by accident***, they built a *'hedge'* around these 613 commandments and developed 39 prohibited acts on the Sabbath.[[35]](#footnote-35)

And they went further to avoid breaking the law, they developed 31 customs or *'oral law'* which became known as the ***'tradition of the elders'*** which, in some ways, became stricter than the law of Moses.

And so, of absolute importance to the Pharisees was to ensure that the ***'tradition of the elders'***was upheld as the first line of defence in protecting the Law of Moses from ever being broken again.

And so, *“the importance of the law in Judaism”* writes John Bright, *“cannot be exaggerated.”* [[36]](#footnote-36)

Their religious approach was ***ethical*** rather than theological - ***legal*** rather than moral - **rigid** rather than caring - ***focused on sin*** rather than mercy and it followed, that they did indeed, *'strained at gnats but swallowed camels'*.

However: the wealthy class who gave rich offerings and bequests to the Temple were pampered: polygamy was common - at least *‘four high priestly families’* [[37]](#footnote-37) and several of the Sanhedrin were from the very wealthy class.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Jesus warned them they, *'knew not the scriptures or the power of God'* and though they themselves, *'do not enter the kingdom of heaven* ***(they thereby)*** *prevented others from doing the same'.*

Of the 95 references in the NT to the Pharisees, most are about their **clashes with Jesus**, murmuring, groaning, grumblings … censuring his movements, spying on him, testing him with loaded questions, trying to entrap him with words and conspiring to kill him for exposing the falseness and gross errors of their teachings!

According to Acts 26.10, Paul[[39]](#footnote-39) may have been a member of the Sanhedrin and voted against Jesus: then, after His death, with all his might he *“took the lead”* in attacking christians – from house to house and synagogue to synagogue, putting Christ’s followers on trial and demanding the death sentence against them.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Only the Romans could execute Jesus and so he was brought before Pontius Pilate who was in authority in the Roman legate in Syria but he resided on the coast at [Caesarea Maritima](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesarea_Maritima). On the occasions when he went to Jerusalem, he used the palace compound built by [Herod the Great](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great) as his [*praetorium*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Praetorium) [[41]](#footnote-41) or headquarters.

Mark uses the word *aulē* which is hall or palace to identify the praetorium but fearing [defilement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_of_holies), the Sanhedrin elders did not enter this court, and Pilate's discussion with them occurred outside in an area called the Pavement.[[42]](#footnote-42)

As the religions professed by the Israelites and the Romans ([Religion in ancient Rome](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_ancient_Rome)) were different, and since at the time Jerusalem was part of [Roman Judea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Judea), the charges of the Sanhedrin against Jesus held no power before Pilate.

Three charges were laid by the Pharisees.

1. perverting the nation of Israel.

2. forbidding the payment of tribute, and

3. [sedition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sedition) against the [Roman Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Empire).

Pilate is only interested in the third one and upon learning that Jesus did not wish to claim any terrestrial kingdom. He was therefore not a political threat and could be seen as innocent of such a charge.

Stepping back outside, Pilate publicly declared that he found no basis to charge Jesus, asking them if they wanted Jesus freed, which they declined, preferring the freedom of [Barabbas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barabbas).

This meant capital punishment for Jesus.

The Roman Empire limited capital punishment to the tribunal of the Roman Governor and though Pilate decided to publicly [wash his hands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood_curse) of it, he gave into the people’s demands to release Barabas and Roman soldiers carried out the crucifixion. Pilate allowed His death even though he found no fault in Him.[[43]](#footnote-43)

[American poet, Reynolds Price](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reynolds_Price)[[44]](#footnote-44) describes this as an exercise in skillful backwater diplomacy.

And so, though he died on the Cross out of love, they nailed him there out of fear.

1. . Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, is the earliest recorded form of the English language, spoken in England and South-Eastern Scotland in the early Middle Ages – the mid-5th century and literary works from mid-7th Century – Norman Conquest. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . Mark, an Introduction and Commentary by Alan Cole. Tyndale Press, London, 1961, p117. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . In the synagogue – Luke 4.31-36 and Mark 1.21-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . Luke 4.38-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. . Matthew 8.5-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. . Mark 2.1-12 and Luke 5.17-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. . See John 6.17, 24, 25 and 59 as the lead-up story. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. . William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary on Mark, Baker Book House, Michigan, 1975, p270 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. . At Capernaum, a fishing village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee with a population of 1,500, it had a ‘Great Synagogue’ which means it had a **strong** or special association with a person, or group of persons of importance to cultural or natural history of a particular place. The title ‘Great’ may have been a later title. For example, a white limestone synagogue, dated in the 3rd century BC was discovered at Capernaum but it was destroyed in the 4th Century AD. Archaeological excavations have revealed found two ancient synagogues built one over the other. A house turned into a church by the Byzantines is believed to have been the home of Saint Peter. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. . Hendriksen, op.cit., p270. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. . Mark 7.1-5 states this plainly and Matthew writes it in chapter 15.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. . The Halakoth, the second part of the Talmud was full of the teachings of the Jewish scholars which had to be followed: the categorical law derived from the Scriptures and taught by prevailing authority figures. Basic to the Pharisaic conception of religion was the belief that the Babylonia Exile was caused by Israel’s failure to keep the Torah (the Mosaic Law). It is no coincidence that Shammai, the rigorist Pharisee, came of a rich aristocratic family. A F Walls, University of Sierra Leone, The New Bible Dictionary, First Edition, IVP London, 1962. p981. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. . A feature of Mark’s gospel is made up of many short units, and of one of the features is his frequent sandwiching together incidents and events. The Oxford Companion to the Bible, Metzger & Coogan, Oxford Press, 1993, p492. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. . Jesus chose Capernaum as the centre of his public ministry in Galilee after he left Nazareth at the beginning of His ministry and now, perhaps his last. Matthew 4.12ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. . At this time, Capernaum had a population of about 1,500 people. Archaelogical excavations revealed two ancient synagogues – one built over the top of the other. A house turned into a synagogue by the Byzantines is believed to have been the original home of Peter. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. . Uknown then, His death by crucifixion was only just a year away. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. . Similarly, the “customary bath” was required and had to be taken before the superintending priest came around for it was a principle that none might go into the court and serve, although he be clean, he had bathed. Edersheim. The Temple, Hendrikson Publishers, Massachusetts, 2016, p110. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. . The practice of proper hygiene was given the Jews shortly after leaving Egypt when God promised them in obedience to His statutes, He would put ‘none of these diseases’ upon them. None of these Diseases, S I McMillen, Revell, 1963, p7. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. . The Pentateuch is Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. . Numbers 19.11. He who touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. . Numbers 19.1-2 etc throughout the chapter, especially v20, 26, 29 and 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. . Alfred Edersheim, op.cit., p278. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. . The Levitical Impurity of the Gentile in Palestine before the Year 70. JSTOR A Buchler, The Jewish Quarterly Review. Vol 17. No 1. July 1926. University of Pennsylvania Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. . Jesus and his [disciples](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disciple_(Christianity)) travel to [Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem_in_Christianity) for [Passover](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passover), where Jesus expels the merchants and consumers from the temple, accusing them of turning it into "a den of thieves" (in the [Synoptic Gospels](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synoptic_Gospels)) and "a house of trade" (in [Gospel of John](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_John)) through their commercial activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. . Matthew 22.29. This is the Greek dunamis () which means ‘authority’ and ‘power’. See Mark 12.24, Luke 1.35 and 9.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. . In common law systems that rely on testimony by witnesses (the people at the synagogue), a leading question implies guilt or contains the implication of guilt by inuendo or silence. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. . Isaiah is the first of the Major Prophets. There are five sections to his prophecies. All except one begin with an attack on arrogance and appeal for justice and culminate in a hymn or prophecy of salvation, and all except one are addressed to the people of Jerusalem. The Oxford Companion to the Bible, Metzger & Coogan, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p326. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. . Isaiah chapters 1 – 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. . Mark v4, “such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels etc.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. . Ignaz Semmelweis, Hungarian Doctor & Scientist 1818-1865 and Joseph Lister, British Surgeon & Pathologist 1827-1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. . William Hendriksen, Commentary on Mark, Baker House, Michigan, 195, p271,

    Originates this statement and provides the essence of these five points. According to John Riches, Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism, University of Glasgow, “the New Testament portrays them principally as opponents of Jesus and the early Christian movement.” The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op.cit., 1993, p288. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. . “… for Samaritans that Jews reserved their profoundest contempt … as a people abhorred of God.” John Bright, A History of Israel, SCM, London, 1974, p447. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. . This statement implies that Jesus may have had ‘a home’ at or near Capernaum, and from where He and the disciples could exercise their ‘Great Galilean Ministry’. It is likely that someone graciously made the place available to him . [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. . Many scholars cite 597 BCE as the date of the first deportation, for in that year King [Jehoiachin](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jehoiachin) was deposed and apparently sent into [exile](https://www.britannica.com/topic/exile-law) with his family, his court, and thousands of workers. Others say the first deportation followed the destruction of [Jerusalem](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jerusalem) by [Nebuchadrezzar](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nebuchadnezzar-II) in 586; if so, the Jews were held in Babylonian captivity for 48 years. Among those who accept a tradition (Jeremiah 29:10) that the exile lasted 70 years, some choose the dates 608 to 538, others 586 to about 516 (the year when the rebuilt [Temple](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Temple-of-Jerusalem) was dedicated in Jerusalem). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. . No planting, plowing or reaping seeds or binding sheaves: no threshing, winnowing, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking flour, and no shearing, spinning, dyeing, weaving, washing, beating or knitting wool. And so it went on: no tying, untying, sewing, tearing for the purpose of sewing, no feeding, watering, trapping, slaughtering of animal, and no flaying, scoring, cutting, curing, scraping hide. No writing, erasing or reading and no digging, building, repairing or tearing down buildings and no lighting of fires etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. . John Bright, A History of Israel, SCM, London, 1974, p435 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. . Jerusalem in the time of Jesus, J Jeremias, SCM, 1969, p94. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. . The priestly aristocrasy belonged to the wealthy class as did the high priest Ananais, Zadok the Chief Priest and Annas and Caiaphas. Op.cit., p96 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. . “… the largest single influence upon his life in the formative years was his Hebraic environment, including his home training and his education under Gamaliel … from age 3.” Everett Harrison, Baker’s Dictionary of Theology, Grand Rapids, 1975, p397. Gamaliel the Elder, or Rabban Gamaliel I, was a leading authority in the Sanhedrin in the early first century AD. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. . FF Bruce, emminent Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis wries in his commentary on the Book of Acts, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 11th Printing, 1975, “(Paul) took the lead in the campaign to uproot this subversive heresy, as he thought it; armed with authority from the chief priests he went from house to house and dragged the followers of Jesus off to jail; he went from synagogue to synagogue and enforced judicial proceedings against them (and) at their triall he cast his vote for their condemnation, and demanded the death sentence against them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. . Officially a praetorium from the Latin originally identifying the tent of a general within a Roman castrum which identified a Roman magistrate. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. . John 19.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. . While the intricate relations of governors, dynasts and republics are everywhere apparent in the New Testament and familiar to its writers, the truly imperial atmosphere of the Caesarian ascendancy pervades it all. Caesar commands the perjered loyalty of the Jews, the spurious allegiance of the Greeks, and the fond confidence of the apostle. Caesar is the supreme ‘king’ to whom christian obedience is due. Yet his very exaltation was fatal to christian loyalty. Thus, while Roman imperial peace opened the way for the gospel, Roman imperial arrogance flung down a mortal challenge. E A Judge, Senior Lecturer in History, University of Sydney. The New Bible Dictionary, First Edition, IVP, London 1962, p1100. See John 19.12 & 15, Acts 17.7 & 25.11 and 1 Peter 2.13. Minor editing of the above quote took place. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. . Edward Reynolds Price, American poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist and Professor of English at Duke University and a lifelong interest in Biblical scholarship. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)