

Most of us grew up in households with particular rules, especially concerning clean bodies. I surely did at 3924 Millersville Drive, Indianapolis, Indiana, 46205. Each night three questions were heard and answered with action.

- Did you brush your teeth? – Mother’s encouragement of good dental hygiene
- Did you wash your hands? -- Mothers hewing to her cognomen “The Queen of Clean”!
- Did you wash your feet? – a recurring Mother mantra on non-bath nights for her two sons!

There was good purpose in these washings. Costly dental bills were avoided. Practical health issues were lessened. And sheets not overly stained with the mess of little boy’s feet were averted. Mother was pleased with the relative cleanliness of her sons (she wasn’t as concerned with our sisters!).

Mark’s gospel is not noted as a “law” gospel. That appellation belongs to Matthew’s gospel, where we have the great Sermon on the Mount (...you have heard it said...but I say...). In this great sermon, the Law of Moses was brought to fulfillment.

Our gospel passage today centers upon the raising of the traditions of the elders to the level of “Law”. A line in the first reading stands in stark juxtaposition to what the Pharisees were doing: “...you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it...”

The Law of Moses nowhere demands washing for ordinary meals, providing one was not compromised by an “unclean” object (Leviticus 15:11)

The Pharisees in Jesus’ time strove to live devout lives by imitating the ritual purity that priests themselves needed at the Temple. Most Pharisees thought that all Jews could or should live as a priestly people, based on the urging “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” as stated in Exodus 19:6.

That’s a fine ideal, to be sure. But to ask folks to do the impossible -- that amidst their ordinary lifestyles they should attain such a vaunted level of religious ritual observance – is not good! In fact, it undermines faith and religious practice.

It is so ironic that the Pharisees lost themselves in traditions and rules while ignoring what really matters. In doing so, they harmed others, violating the very Covenant they believed they were supporting!

Throughout the four gospels, Jesus was not about canceling laws or abolishing the laws, whether ritual or otherwise. There is no evidence he dismissed his religious culture that practiced additional pious expressions.

But he regularly criticized misuse of traditions and laws, particularly when they were advanced on the backs of those who were least able to adhere to them.

Jesus, here and in other encounters with the Pharisees, names them “hypocrites”. The ancient Greek word means “pretender”, coming from the verb used in Greek drama for “playing a part”. He names them such because of their moral rigidity and obtuse spirit, whose intense devotion and commitment got out of hand. For Jesus, they may look devout, but their interior was not transformed. They focused on the exterior rituals to the detriment of their Jewish brothers and sisters. As such, they were “pretenders”.

Are we such pretenders? Do we strive after ritual purities but neglect the interior purities, and thus cast a glance of disapproval upon others who are not as observant as ourselves? Recall Matthew 10:25ff: “my yoke is easy, my burden light...”

Homily: 22nd Sunday, OT, B

It comes down to this, as our Gospel passage today insists: it's a matter of the heart. The first focus for any believer needs to be what comes forth from our hearts, the core of our being.

Throughout this week, each day, let us pray the second half of Psalm 51. It begins: "Create in me a clean heart, O God..." Ask the Lord each day to help in purifying our hearts.

Only then can we speak to essential religious observances with an eye to the heart, first and foremost.