

This is a true story - you can't make stuff like this up. It happened in Charlotte, NC. A man bought a box of very expensive cigars. He protected his investment by taking out an insurance policy on the cigars. He insured them against; "decay, spoilage, theft and fire." Over the next few weeks he proceeded to smoke all of the cigars in the box; then he filed a claim with his insurance company, stating that the cigars were lost in a series of small . . . .fires. Of course, the insurance company rejected the claim, which ended up in civil court. Even though the man admitted smoking the cigars, he won the case because, . . ."the company declared the cigars insurable property, and did insure them against fire, and the Company failed to specify what sort of fire was excluded, therefore the claim is legitimate." The man collected \$15,000. As he was leaving the courthouse, the man was arrested and charged with 24 counts of arson. After all, he had confessed to setting "the series of small fires" which had caused his loss of property. He was convicted and sentenced to 24 months in jail and was fined \$24,000. (*News of the Weird*)

Intent versus letter of the law has been debated for, probably, as long as rules have been made. Last week I quoted the jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. on his take on the subject. But, today, our reading from *Mark* focuses not so much on intention, although one could draw that out of the text; rather, it's about how our words and actions honor God. As we heard, the religious leaders who saw Jesus as a threat sought to blame Him indirectly when they accused His disciples of eating without following the proscribed ritual for washing hands before a meal.

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To get an idea of how important this was to certain Jewish groups, William Barclay tells the story of a Rabbi imprisoned by the Romans who used the water given to him for hand-washing rather than drinking, and in the end, nearly perished of thirst, because he was determined to observe the rules of cleanliness rather than to satisfy his thirst.

Are there times when we choose "cleanliness" over "godliness?" But, more is at stake than whether and how we follow the letter of the law or whether

and how we seek to discern its intent. The Pharisee-types of today try to get folk to refrain from certain food and drink, to not engage in certain behavior, to abstain from listening to certain music — actually, I really should note that the contrary is more the case. You hear, as I do, folks say that the true Christian only eats this food or drinks only certain beverages; and that to behave in certain ways guarantees a place in heaven; that unless the music praises God (or celebrate the praising of God), the person listening is not going to heaven.

The radical thing here in *Mark* is that Jesus says such behavior is not what God's about. Yes, God wants us to behave certain ways; yes, God is pleased when we sing praises to Him; and no, God doesn't "freak out" when we eat pork or shrimp, or bread before ritualized hand-washing. What is important is that everything we say and do is about honoring God and about serving in God's Kin-dom, here on earth.

Remember, Jesus said, "What goes in is not as important as what comes out."

That can be tough, because it's easier to become ritualistic — again, as you hear: say this prayer, do these things, hold worship this way, and you, too, can get into heaven. Jesus tells us that God is less concerned about that stuff and more concerned about how we love our Biblical neighbors, and how we reflect God's love, hope, and grace; how we make visible God's Kin-dom here on earth as it is in heaven.

"The problem that Jesus confronts in this text is that the Pharisees chose to obey the rules without remembering the relationships that lie beneath the rules. If we are honest, we will admit that this is sometimes true of us as well. We make religious rules that are intended to help us live together as Godly people. Then, over time, we forget that the rules are there to help us, not to hurt us, in our relationships with each other in the community of Christ."

At the Car Collectors Museum in Nashville, TN, there used to be a 1918 Dodge Touring Car on display. Its little placard told an interesting story: In 1918, the father of Albert Hilliard bought this car for \$705. In 1921, Albert

1918, the father of Albert Hillyard bought this car for \$785. In 1921, Albert and his brother got into an argument over who was going to drive the car into town on Saturday night. Their father drove the car into the garage and shut the door. There the car remained until found 38 years later, covered with dirt and chicken manure, with only 1800 miles on the odometer.

When we stop and think about Mr. Hillyard and his Dodge Touring Car, we might see more clearly the problem. The father attempted to heal the

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breach between his children by making a rule when what was needed was reconciliation. He said, "Okay, neither one of you gets to drive it!" But I'm willing to bet that the boys just went on to argue about something else, and then about something else, and then about something else. You see, the car wasn't the problem. The problem was the jealousy and strife that lived in that family and in those brothers' hearts.

So it is with all of us. Since our problem lies within our hearts the healing must also start there. Jesus calls us to understand that it's not about the rules; it's about the relationships; the relationship between us and God; and the relationships between us and each other. That's why Jesus says that the things that come out are what defile. And just a bit later he notes it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.

Along these lines, St. Augustine said that there is a hole in our hearts that only God can fill, that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. No amount of rules and regulations and guidelines can change our hearts. Only God can do that.

And, we need to do our part. As I said, relationships are the important key. I think that's why many of us are drawn to smaller congregations rather than big churches. Here we experience the love for God and neighbor as family. Here when we talk about siblings in Christ, we understand those words to mean more than those people with whom we share parentage.

The people next to whom we sit Sunday in and Sunday out are our family; we care for each of them, we worry for each of them, we love each of them

because we know that God in Christ love us and calls us to love them as we are loved.

This generous love is far more important than rules and regulations about our behavior, far more important than which food or drink is pure or not; more important than who is “worthy” of being offered the gift of life, and who is not. James, in his letter to the churches under his care, wrote, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

In caring for others we place our Godliness before cleanliness. In holding our relationships with God and our neighbors as more important than worrying about whether we are meeting each exacting rule to its fullest extent, we are upholding God’s primary rule of love and fulfilling the spirit of that rule.

When we do and say those things that defile our relationships with God, with our family and friends, even those with acquaintances and strangers and claim that others have to behave in ways that we demand are absolutely required, we are not living by and into the spirit of God’s love.

We are holding to a narrow form of legalism and, in effect, breaking God’s plan and purpose.

Rather, let us joyfully receive God’s gift of love so that it becomes the catalyst for transforming all that we say and do into the image of Christ Jesus, our Savior, Redeemer, and Lord. Let us allow God to change our hearts, to move our words and actions to reflect God’s love, grace, mercy, peace, and hope. Because God has been generous, so generous, in fact, that the Lord of all, the Creator of all life, gave us His Son, so that we would be reconciled with God, so that we would be in joyful, loving relationship

with each other and with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, You show Your generous love in, through, and as Jesus the Christ, Your Son and our Lord. You desire our words and actions to reflect Your love in all that we say and do. By the Holy Spirit, move our hearts and minds to transform our thoughts and deeds to show the world that Your Kin-dom is here on earth just as it is in heaven. Amen.