

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Food for the Road: Empty Calories”

Dr. Jay Howell

Mark 7:1-13

October 12, 2025

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[Read passage, Mark 7:1-13.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

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“So what kinds of junk food did you get?”

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But for the boys, my suspicion had been that it had started to seep in for them too: something they look forward as the calendar starts to turn to October, as the air starts to get a little crisper and the leaves start to fall, as school winds down for Fall Break. Maybe it's something they cherish and look forward to as well, some time in the great outdoors, some quality time with their old man.

And then they come up to me with this gem of a question: “So what kinds of junk food did you get?” And I realize that over the course of the camping trip, I really do load them up on stuff that isn't good for them. S'mores. Easy mac. Hot dogs. Potato chips. Nutty bars. Pancakes and syrup. I suppose it's a kind of bribe to get them there, or maybe just to keep them there when they get tired or cranky—“Homesick? How about a snack?” But it makes me wonder whether the tradition, insofar as they perceive it at least, is all this junk food.

As the Gospel of Mark continues, the role of tradition and, with it, the law and its application to eating are in focus in this exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees.

As Jesus and his disciples continue in Christ's ministry of healing throughout Galilee, some Pharisees and scribes come to him from Jerusalem. They notice that Jesus' disciples weren't washing their hands before eating, and they confront Jesus about it. "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

Now that's a loaded question, because just from reading it, it can sound as if the disciples were willfully breaking some law from the Old Testament, from the Torah, the Books of Moses. There are other instances in which what the disciples do appears to clash with some law from the Torah, and that's another topic, but that isn't one of them.

If you listen closely, the Pharisees and scribes never accuse Jesus and the disciples of breaking the Law, per se, but rather, what was the phrase they use? Not living "according to the tradition of the elders."

Here's what that means: it was most likely oral tradition passed down, or some form of what's known as Mishnah, a tradition handed down often in writing by rabbis and religious authorities. Still somewhat authoritative, but not what was considered *the Law*.

Practically, we might be thinking, "Hey, not a bad idea. Wash your hands before you eat." I mean, isn't that somewhat expected and healthy? I mean, if you were to keep track of whether the Howell boys on this past camping trip, after they'd come out of playing in the dirt or out of the bathroom, and then come back to the campsite to see an open bag of chips, do you think you'd see them go over to the bottle of hand sanitizer before reaching in, mixing around the chips a little bit, before finally grabbing a small handful to eat? If you're kind of grossed out by that, it's for good reason. Not the worst idea for it to be socially accepted practice to wash your hands before eating, just for hygienic reasons.

But that's not why this was going on. It wasn't hygiene. Still another layer to this was that the tradition of washing one's hands before eating was born not out of a desire to apply the tenets of the Law more broadly, as a source of renewal.

More specifically, never does the Law in the Old Testament say, "You should wash your hands before eating." Doesn't say that. What it does say is that priests who were preparing to enter the presence of God in the Tabernacle should ritually purify themselves before doing so.

Therefore, the thinking would go, wouldn't it be a good spiritual practice to take the lawful practice of a priest purifying himself before God and apply it not just to priests and not just in the Tabernacle but to everyone before every meal? Wouldn't that be just a small way for each individual seeking the Lord to be reminded of how we should seek to be holy as the Lord is holy, and for that to be baked into every single meal? Seems kind of reasonable when you think of it that way.

That's how the practice emerged, to the point that, as the text specifies, not just the Pharisees did this, but "all the Jews." And not just washing their hands, but washing everything bought from the market, and not just washing the food itself, but washing all the cups and pots and kettles that might be used in preparing and serving the food. All of it for the purpose of applying the ritual purity of priests coming into God's presence to the daily act of eating.

Here's what might be an equivalent for us. I mean, grimy kids camping aside, washing your hands before eating and washing plates and pots and pans before and after use is all pretty commonplace and expected these days for hygienic reasons, but here's what it might look like even in the context of a Presbyterian worship service.

Earlier in the service, we joined together in what we call the Prayer of Confession. We do this every week. We gather in praise unto God, singing together, but not too much time goes by before we are called into a place of examination and reflection, to consider how we have fallen short of the glory of God, and confessing those shortcomings to God and one another. Then, in response to that confession, we are assured of the grace of God to forgive and restore us.

Now why do we do this? Because I'll let you in on a secret. There's no Scripture passage saying "Thou shalt join in prayer together fessing up to all the ways thou screwed up in the past week, then thou shalt join in time of awkward silence, when thou art supposed to confess some more about how thou individually screwed up, but really thou shalt spend the first few seconds enjoying some blissful quiet, then thou shalt remember thou art supposed to be confessing silently, but then thy confession shall be interrupted when the leader sayeth 'Amen.'"

That was a bit tongue in cheek, I know. But the point is, there's no part of Scripture that says you *must* take time of confession as a part of worship. So why do we do it?

Well, in a similar way as the Pharisees and scribes and broadly Jewish tradition drew from the purity rituals for priests, similarly the church has historically drawn from those same purity rituals, as well as wisdom from the psalms and the epistles, all of which hold that one should not presume to approach the Lord God Almighty as if we're all hunky-dory. No, it is incumbent upon us to recognize how we have fallen short of the glory of God, and even the practice of gathering in worship in the presence of God warrants some acknowledgement that we are not worthy to do so.

So before we knock the Pharisees and the scribes and the tradition of the elders too much, we kind of have the same thing going on each week, and in a lot of ways, it can be a good thing. And maybe it was a worthwhile question for them to ask: say, everyone else washes their hands. How come your disciples don't?

Just like it'd be a worthwhile question if, say, you were visiting another church with family or friends, and you notice that they didn't have some kind of confession as part of the worship service, and so you ask your family or friends about it, and they say, "Oh, we don't do that." So maybe you ask, "So, do you recognize one's sin in other ways, some other kind of confession together, or accountability, or vulnerability, something like that?" And maybe they say, "Nah, the preacher says we don't really need to. We don't really talk about sin or shortcomings or things like that." Then at that point, it may be indicative that something's amiss, because in following Jesus as his disciple and *never* recognizing one's own shortcomings and our need for grace, or if a gathering in the name of Jesus says "Eh, there's nothing really we need to be forgiven for," that's problematic.

That's a worthwhile question to ask. What wouldn't be a good thing to do is visit that same church with that same friend or family member, notice they don't do some kind of confession of sin, and then say accusatorily, "You don't have a Prayer of Confession? You're doing it wrong."

Hear the difference? It's taking what can be a good extension of biblical testimony and application of spiritual practice and turning the specific practice itself into this litmus test: "Why do your disciples eat with defiled hands?" in other words.

That's where the Pharisees and scribes were coming from. That's what Jesus was calling out when he turned the question back on them. That's why he brings up this thing called "Corban," in the latter part of the passage. That's a longer conversation, but short version is that they were twisting the Law and tradition to get out of doing right by their parents, thus revealing where their hearts were for the role of tradition itself. That's why he accuses them of having hearts far from God, worshiping in vain, because, citing Isaiah, they were teaching "human precepts as doctrines."

That's when the tradition becomes more like the junk food on our camping trips. The trip, the tradition could be a good thing, quality time together, enjoying the beauty of creation. But maybe it's turned into something that ultimately isn't good for us.

Doesn't have to be just a matter of a liturgical element of worship like the Prayer of Confession. Could be some spiritual practice you've embraced, or that we've embraced as a church, or something your family has done for a long time, or something you've done for a long time.

We'll be spending a lot of time talking about food in this series, just because Jesus talks a lot about food. But obviously it's not just about food. It's about discipleship, it's about the journey of faith, it's about following Jesus in real practice.

And in that journey, obviously things like tradition, ritual, repetition can have a powerful role in shaping faith and faithful practice. We lean on those who came before us.

But they can also become unhealthy when they are the end unto themselves. Why have a Prayer of Confession? Well because that's how you're supposed to do it. Or some kind of circular rationale like that. They can become empty practices, and like the empty calories of junk food, and they will not ultimately nourish us.

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So before we knock the Pharisees and the scribes and the tradition of the elders too much, we kind of have the same thing going on each week, and in a lot of ways, it can be a good thing. And maybe it was a worthwhile question for them to ask: say, everyone else washes their hands. How come your disciples don't?

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We looked at those three ways we might consider discipleship by a close walk through the account of Christ walking on the water in the Gospel of Mark. And so though today we begin a different series, we are in fact picking up where we left off in Mark's Gospel and will be journeying through the next couple of chapters, which focus a lot on, of all things, food.

So as we consider this walk of discipleship Christ calls us to, we'll ask, well, just how are we being fed along the way?

Let's go to God's Word together.

[Read passage, Mark 7:1-13.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, we praise you for you draw us into close fellowship at your Table, for you nourish us by your Word. Bless us this day in your Spirit, revealing your Word to us anew, and for the Word spoken and heard this morning, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“So what kinds of junk food did you get?”

That's a question I was asked more times than I'd care to admit in the lead up to a camping trip I took the boys on last week. We've done this the past couple of years over Fall Break, and it's become a little tradition for us, something I deeply cherish and look forward to.

But for the boys, my suspicion had been that it had started to seep in for them too: something they look forward as the calendar starts to turn to October, as the air starts to get a little crisper and the leaves start to fall, as school winds down for Fall Break. Maybe it's something they cherish and look forward to as well, some time in the great outdoors, some quality time with their old man.

And then they come up to me with this gem of a question: “So what kinds of junk food did you get?” And I realize that over the course of the camping trip, I really do load them up on stuff that isn't good for them. S'mores. Easy mac. Hot dogs. Potato chips. Nutty bars. Pancakes and syrup. I suppose it's a kind of bribe to get them there, or maybe just to keep them there when they get tired or cranky—“Homesick? How about a snack?” But it makes me wonder whether the tradition, insofar as they perceive it at least, is all this junk food.

As the Gospel of Mark continues, the role of tradition and, with it, the law and its application to eating are in focus in this exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees.

As Jesus and his disciples continue in Christ's ministry of healing throughout Galilee, some Pharisees and scribes come to him from Jerusalem. They notice that Jesus' disciples weren't washing their hands before eating, and they confront Jesus about it. "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

Now that's a loaded question, because just from reading it, it can sound as if the disciples were willfully breaking some law from the Old Testament, from the Torah, the Books of Moses. There are other instances in which what the disciples do appears to clash with some law from the Torah, and that's another topic, but that isn't one of them.

If you listen closely, the Pharisees and scribes never accuse Jesus and the disciples of breaking the Law, per se, but rather, what was the phrase they use? Not living "according to the tradition of the elders."

Here's what that means: it was most likely oral tradition passed down, or some form of what's known as Mishnah, a tradition handed down often in writing by rabbis and religious authorities. Still somewhat authoritative, but not what was considered *the Law*.

Practically, we might be thinking, "Hey, not a bad idea. Wash your hands before you eat." I mean, isn't that somewhat expected and healthy? I mean, if you were to keep track of whether the Howell boys on this past camping trip, after they'd come out of playing in the dirt or out of the bathroom, and then come back to the campsite to see an open bag of chips, do you think you'd see them go over to the bottle of hand sanitizer before reaching in, mixing around the chips a little bit, before finally grabbing a small handful to eat? If you're kind of grossed out by that, it's for good reason. Not the worst idea for it to be socially accepted practice to wash your hands before eating, just for hygienic reasons.

But that's not why this was going on. It wasn't hygiene. Still another layer to this was that the tradition of washing one's hands before eating was born not out of a desire to apply the tenets of the Law more broadly, as a source of renewal.

More specifically, never does the Law in the Old Testament say, "You should wash your hands before eating." Doesn't say that. What it does say is that priests who were preparing to enter the presence of God in the Tabernacle should ritually purify themselves before doing so.

Therefore, the thinking would go, wouldn't it be a good spiritual practice to take the lawful practice of a priest purifying himself before God and apply it not just to priests and not just in the Tabernacle but to everyone before every meal? Wouldn't that be just a small way for each individual seeking the Lord to be reminded of how we should seek to be holy as the Lord is holy, and for that to be baked into every single meal? Seems kind of reasonable when you think of it that way.

That's how the practice emerged, to the point that, as the text specifies, not just the Pharisees did this, but "all the Jews." And not just washing their hands, but washing everything bought from the market, and not just washing the food itself, but washing all the cups and pots and kettles that might be used in preparing and serving the food. All of it for the purpose of applying the ritual purity of priests coming into God's presence to the daily act of eating.

Here's what might be an equivalent for us. I mean, grimy kids camping aside, washing your hands before eating and washing plates and pots and pans before and after use is all pretty commonplace and expected these days for hygienic reasons, but here's what it might look like even in the context of a Presbyterian worship service.

Earlier in the service, we joined together in what we call the Prayer of Confession. We do this every week. We gather in praise unto God, singing together, but not too much time goes by before we are called into a place of examination and reflection, to consider how we have fallen short of the glory of God, and confessing those shortcomings to God and one another. Then, in response to that confession, we are assured of the grace of God to forgive and restore us.

Now why do we do this? Because I'll let you in on a secret. There's no Scripture passage saying "Thou shalt join in prayer together fessing up to all the ways thou screwed up in the past week, then thou shalt join in time of awkward silence, when thou art supposed to confess some more about how thou individually screwed up, but really thou shalt spend the first few seconds enjoying some blissful quiet, then thou shalt remember thou art supposed to be confessing silently, but then thy confession shall be interrupted when the leader sayeth 'Amen.'"

That was a bit tongue in cheek, I know. But the point is, there's no part of Scripture that says you *must* take time of confession as a part of worship. So why do we do it?

Well, in a similar way as the Pharisees and scribes and broadly Jewish tradition drew from the purity rituals for priests, similarly the church has historically drawn from those same purity rituals, as well as wisdom from the psalms and the epistles, all of which hold that one should not presume to approach the Lord God Almighty as if we're all hunky-dory. No, it is incumbent upon us to recognize how we have fallen short of the glory of God, and even the practice of gathering in worship in the presence of God warrants some acknowledgement that we are not worthy to do so.

So before we knock the Pharisees and the scribes and the tradition of the elders too much, we kind of have the same thing going on each week, and in a lot of ways, it can be a good thing. And maybe it was a worthwhile question for them to ask: say, everyone else washes their hands. How come your disciples don't?

Just like it'd be a worthwhile question if, say, you were visiting another church with family or friends, and you notice that they didn't have some kind of confession as part of the worship service, and so you ask your family or friends about it, and they say, "Oh, we don't do that." So maybe you ask, "So, do you recognize one's sin in other ways, some other kind of confession together, or accountability, or vulnerability, something like that?" And maybe they say, "Nah, the preacher says we don't really need to. We don't really talk about sin or shortcomings or things like that." Then at that point, it may be indicative that something's amiss, because in following Jesus as his disciple and *never* recognizing one's own shortcomings and our need for grace, or if a gathering in the name of Jesus says "Eh, there's nothing really we need to be forgiven for," that's problematic.

That's a worthwhile question to ask. What wouldn't be a good thing to do is visit that same church with that same friend or family member, notice they don't do some kind of confession of sin, and then say accusatorily, "You don't have a Prayer of Confession? You're doing it wrong."

Hear the difference? It's taking what can be a good extension of biblical testimony and application of spiritual practice and turning the specific practice itself into this litmus test: "Why do your disciples eat with defiled hands?" in other words.

That's where the Pharisees and scribes were coming from. That's what Jesus was calling out when he turned the question back on them. That's why he brings up this thing called "Corban," in the latter part of the passage. That's a longer conversation, but short version is that they were twisting the Law and tradition to get out of doing right by their parents, thus revealing where their hearts were for the role of tradition itself. That's why he accuses them of having hearts far from God, worshiping in vain, because, citing Isaiah, they were teaching "human precepts as doctrines."

That's when the tradition becomes more like the junk food on our camping trips. The trip, the tradition could be a good thing, quality time together, enjoying the beauty of creation. But maybe it's turned into something that ultimately isn't good for us.

Doesn't have to be just a matter of a liturgical element of worship like the Prayer of Confession. Could be some spiritual practice you've embraced, or that we've embraced as a church, or something your family has done for a long time, or something you've done for a long time.

We'll be spending a lot of time talking about food in this series, just because Jesus talks a lot about food. But obviously it's not just about food. It's about discipleship, it's about the journey of faith, it's about following Jesus in real practice.

And in that journey, obviously things like tradition, ritual, repetition can have a powerful role in shaping faith and faithful practice. We lean on those who came before us.

But they can also become unhealthy when they are the end unto themselves. Why have a Prayer of Confession? Well because that's how you're supposed to do it. Or some kind of circular rationale like that. They can become empty practices, and like the empty calories of junk food, and they will not ultimately nourish us.

What might those be for you? It's not a clear, "These things are good, and these things are bad." The whole issue is taking something that came about for good reasons but twisting them into an end unto themselves or a litmus test against others or some rote practice without any kind of spiritual meaning. Does anything come to mind?

The answer might not be, "Hey, stop doing that thing." The answer could be, "Reclaim the heart of why you do it." Imagine if the disciples, as a point of spite, never washed their hands ever, saying, well that's an empty tradition.

Instead it could mean, hey, if you want camping to be a tradition for right reasons, maybe reshape it to make sure it's treasured for things other than Nutty Bars.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.