

What is most important? The Pharisees held tradition to be most important. Their view was narrow and legalistic. They upheld the tradition as a way of excluding others. Jesus and his disciples did not fit in with the external practices of piety in matters of purification. So the Pharisees and scribes questioned Jesus, “Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?” (Mk 7:5).

Jesus counters their narrow view by going back in tradition and quoting the prophets of how they say one thing but act another way. “Love songs are on their lips, but in their hearts they pursue dishonest gain” (Ez 33:31). We might liken this saying to the dishonorable president of Afghanistan who said that the country would fight against the Taliban and never give in. 24 hours later, he fled the country with a plane load full of cash.

The Pharisees want to tie people’s hands behind their backs, but in their hearts, Jesus sees the evil intent, their malice, their arrogance, their deceit. This is not a broad condemnation against all Pharisees, it is aimed particularly at those in power in Jerusalem. During his passion and death, we will see the murderous intent of the elite leadership when they stir the crowds up to chant, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” (Lk 23:21).

What is most important? Jesus came to libertate. “On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll; and out of gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see. The lowly shall again find joy in the LORD, the poorest rejoice in the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 29:18-19).

Traditionally, the Gospel of Mark is believed to have been written shortly before 70 AD. Mark was based in Rome and the church there was primarily gentile, unfamiliar with Jewish customs. “The early Christians were a people of tradition of practices and beliefs that they received and handed on. At first, while still close to their Jewish origins they remained faithful to the Jewish traditions of their [ancestors]. However, as the various communities gradually welcomed gentiles, new traditions common to both sprang from the new identity they found in Christ” (LaVerdiere 184). The older Jewish traditions so dear to the earlier generation of Christians had to be set aside in order for the church to grow and welcome people who heard the saving message of the Gospel and wanted to follow Jesus Christ. There was great tension in the church of Mark’s era between those who held to the tradition of the past in such a way to exclude others.

What is most important? Jesus came to libertate. He came to set us free from the sin that binds us. Contrition for our sins is most important. “My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a contrite, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn” (Ps 51:19). God can not only wash away our sins, but He can also help us to rise from the failure of our sins. This is what resurrection is all about. “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ez 36:26).

And what of our own times? We live in a very polarized society. People want to dig dirt up on their enemies for past indiscretions and hold it over their heads. Never forgive. Condemn an individual for something said without thinking as if it were a deeply held belief. Imagine Jesus coming along and saying, “Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). Wouldn’t you find fault with Jesus for not washing his hands and observing the external practices of piety?

What is most important? We must let go of hurt, we too must forgive. Jesus calls us to let go of the unwashed hands that we hold onto and seek cleaning at the deepest level where there is hurt and suffering and pain. In those moments of forgiving our enemies, we are most like Christlike. Instead of an eye for an eye, or worse yet an escalation of hostility, we have a real

opportunity to change hearts and minds. Heartfelt forgiveness helps to heal deep divisions and wounds.

This is no easy task. In fact, we may find that such forgiveness is beyond our fallen human capacity alone. Here we need to seek God's help. Brothers and sisters: "everyone should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, for the wrath of a man does not accomplish the righteousness of God. Therefore, put away all filth and evil excess and humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls" (Jas 17:19-22).