

They Say

Mark 7:1-23

Introduction

Along the waterfront in Detroit, not far from the Aretha Franklin concert venue, you will find an upscale restaurant named "They Say." The restaurant features live music, and a menu with chicken wings, burgers, and even a half-rack of lamb chops. On the dessert menu there is an awesome looking 7-layer carrot cake.

I've never been there, so I can't recommend it firsthand. The Yelp reviews are mixed, so frankly I would be hesitant to go even if I had the opportunity. But I am intrigued by the name: "They Say." Curious enough, in fact, I called the restaurant this week to ask how they got their name. There was a long pause. And then they hung up on me. So I still don't know. You might say, that in this instance, they didn't say.

Usually that's not the case. Usually THEY always have something to say. You may not know who THEY are, but pick a subject, any subject, and someone is sure to remark:

Well, you know what THEY say ...

THEY have been around for a long time, haven't THEY. THEY are timeless creatures who have been saying things for centuries. Sometimes people have chosen to ignore what THEY have to say. Other times, though, what THEY say carries a lot of weight. Lives and entire cultures change because of what THEY have to say.

Today you see that play out in the Gospel text. We read that the disciples were hungry, so they grabbed a bite to eat. They reached right into that big red and white bucket, pulled out an original recipe drumstick, and took a big bite. Mmmmm. Delicious!

But wait! You can't do that, they were told. You can't do that because you know what THEY say ... THEY say you have to wash your hands first! Here's how the text starts:

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law ... saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed... So they asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?" (Mark 7:1-2, 5)

Now, at first glance, that rule makes perfect sense. Every mother and grandmother listening to my voice has said something similar. We've all heard it: "Time for supper! Go wash your hands." And my mom would add "And use soap." Why? No one wants dirty little hands fingering their food.

But that's not exactly what was going on here. The disciples weren't being chastised because their hands were physically dirty. Look closely at the words. These hands were not dirty. They were "defiled." THEY say that even hands that are clean physically could well be unclean spiritually.

It is true that the Law of God required that certain things – including hands – be washed before some of the various religious activities of the faith. Offering sacrifices, for example. The handwashing ritual symbolized the washing away of sin. But fairly soon after God's Law was given, THEY began to stretch the God-given requirements into some very absurd applications.

This text is an example. Think about it this way: Suppose you – a godly, righteous Lutheran – go through the drive through at KFC to buy a bucket of chicken.

- And further suppose the person who reaches through the window to hand you your food happens to be, of all things, a Baptist or some other kind of sinner.
- Now, your godly Lutheran hands have a problem because they touched the same bag that a non-Lutheran touched.
- Here is where things really get complicated. You reach into that bucket with your defiled hands, and you Baptist germs all over drumstick.
- And then you eat it!
- Now your whole body is unclean. All because you wouldn't wash your hands.

Just substitute Jews and Gentiles into that story and you get the picture. You don't dare eat until you wash first. So THEY said a good Jew will always do a ritual washing before eating.

And that's the issue here. The religious leaders in today's Gospel were very concerned about what THEY – those creators of the tradition – had to say on the issue. For thousands of year, the Jewish people were driven far more by what those THEYS said than what God had actually said on the issue.

- Their faith had always been lived in light of what THEY said. Disregarding the rituals of washing was in their minds a sin.

Now fast-forward to today. All around us are all kinds of people – even very religious people – who are competing to tell us how to live our lives. THEY say this. THEY say that. How do you sort through all that? Especially when it comes to matters of faith.

Well, Jesus addresses that. He puts His response in the form of a checklist:

#1: WHATEVER THEY SAY ... CHECK ON THEIR HEART

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus warns:

These people (THEY) honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.
They worship in vain ... (Mark 7:6)

This addresses the question of authenticity. In essence Jesus calls these religious leaders "hypocrites" – people whose mouths say things the right religious things, but whose hearts are devoted to the anonymous THEYS in their lives. And as a result, Jesus says, their worship is useless.

In another similar passage Jesus would accuse these religious leaders of using what THEY said to avoid taking care of their aging parents.

- Jesus would call them “whitewashed tombs.” Pretty on the outside but stinky on the inside.

One Sunday morning a little boy was in church listening to the pastor's sermon when he asked his father, “Dad, what is a Christian?”

The father replied, “A Christian is a person who loves and obeys God. He loves his friends and neighbors, and even his enemies. He prays often, is kind, gentle, and holy, and is more interested in going to heaven than in all earthly riches. That, son, is a Christian!”

The boy looked puzzled and thought for a minute, then asked, “Have I ever seen one?”

This generation is desperately searching for something authentic. (Joyce Meyer)

#2: WHATEVER THEY SAY ... CHECK IN WITH GOD

Look at verse 8:

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions. (Mark 7:8)

This addresses the question of authority. Who do you listen to as the final authority on any subject?

The story is told about a pastor who was at odds with the president of his church council. Finally the president said, "Pastor, we need to call a special council meeting to settle this dispute once and for all."

So the pastor and the 12 members of the council all met to discuss the issue. It wasn't long before the pastor realized that the whole council was taking the side of the president. So when the vote was called for, the president say "We will let the majority rule." The vote was 12 to 1. "You were outvoted, pastor. I have the majority on my side."

The pastor thought a minute and then rose to his feet, "So you think you are right and I am wrong because of a vote. Well, think again, for I will call on the Lord God Almighty to give us a sign that I am right and you are wrong."

Immediately, a deafening clap of thunder sounded, accompanied by a brilliant flash. The solid oak table in the meeting room was split down the middle. The room was filled with smoke and the president and the council members were thrown to the floor. But the pastor remained standing -- untouched and triumphant.

The president of the council slowly rose from underneath the table. His hair was singed, his glasses were hanging from one ear and his clothes were in great disarray. Finally, after some time, he responded saying, "Alright, alright, the vote is 12 to 2. But I still have the majority!"

A funny story. But think how it plays out in real life.

- On the one hand we have the voice of God speaking through the pages of Scripture: *"Whenever you are tempted to turn to the right or to the left, you will hear his voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way. Walk in it.'"* (Isaiah 30:21)
- On the other hand, THEY are shouting from all corners of your life. No! Walk this way.

Which voice do you heed? Jesus tells us to hang onto the hand of God. Don't let go of it in order to follow anything else.

#3: WHATEVER THEY SAY ... CHECK OUT THE FRUIT

Verse

Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. (Mark 7:15)

And then He provides a laundry list of the despicable things that flow from a defiled heart:

... sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person. (Mark 7:21-23)

This is the application question. When THEY apply their own teaching to their lives, what is the result?

There once was a teenage boy who used to sneak out of his house at night even though he knew he wasn't supposed to do it. He would climb down an old fruit tree next to his bedroom window.

One day he overheard his father say he was going to cut that fruit tree down. It hadn't born any fruit for years. So that night the boy and his friends bought a bushel of apples and super-glued them to the barren branches of that tree.

The next morning at breakfast the father was in awe as he told his wife, "You know that old fruit tree that I planned to cut down. This morning it is full of apples. I've never seen anything like it."

And then he went on, "And here's the really amazing part. It's a peach tree."

The Scriptures tell us that fruit doesn't lie.

Constantly be on your guard against phony prophets ... You can spot them by their actions, for the fruits of their character will be obvious. You won't find sweet grapes hanging on a thorn bush, and you'll never pick good fruit from a tumbleweed. So if the tree is good, it will produce good fruit; but if the tree is bad, it will bear only rotten fruit and deserves to be cut down and burned. You'll know them by the obvious fruit of their lives. (Matthew 7:15-20)

The old computer maxim is “garbage in, garbage out.” And THEY say a lot of stuff that is pure garbage. So we are called on to always check the fruit. Because fruit never lies.

APPLICATION

Standing on the banks of the Jordan River, after wandering for 40 years in the wilderness, the people of Israel heard their leader Moses say the words in our first reading today:

Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you. (Deuteronomy 4:1-2)

In other words, don't listen to what THEY say. God will tell you what you need to know. Now just do it.

Still good advice today.

Amen.