

Our Gospel today is a continuation of the controversy that began at the beginning the chapter. The Pharisees and scribes question Jesus why His disciples do not follow the tradition of the elders by eating a meal with unclean hands. For the Pharisees and scribes, all Jews were expected to participate in the ritual washing of their hands, along with cups, jugs, and kettles used for preparing meals.

Jesus responded by quoting from Isaiah who accused the people of serving God with lip service. In contrast to complying with merely external religious practices, God wills an interior transformation of the heart. We know that this transformation, of course, happens when one truly encounters Jesus.

Jesus, then, is concerned with the heart. In the biblical tradition, the heart represents the inner depth of a person. It is the place where a person either responds to God or resists Him. It is the source of emotions such as love, anxiety, or joy. It is where decisions are made.

In this current controversy, then, the question looms around what really defiles a person. Is it external things such as food or matters of the heart – evil actions and sinful intentions? Clearly, Jesus puts forth it is the latter.

Jesus lists a number of evil actions – unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, and so forth – these defile a person. Along with actions, He lists a number of evil dispositions such as greed, envy, and arrogance. It is evil actions and dispositions, then, which defile a person.

This section of Mark's gospel was very important for determining the direction of the early Church. The early Church, in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, was not focused on making food distinctions, but rather on conversion to Christ and the ethical life that flows from it. In fact, this is often the structure of many of St. Paul's letters. He first puts forth Christ as our savior and from there explains how we ought to live in Him.

For us today, may we practice our faith – which includes external observances – without losing sight of their meaning and goal. The purpose of our faith is to bring us into contact with Christ, and through Him, with others. Thus, may God truly transform our hearts so they are pleasing to Him.