

What's the Problem?

Have you ever watched someone with a new purchase, a purchase in one of those boxes with that label that says “easy to assemble” on the outside? How many times have you seen someone spread all those pieces out, some in little packets, those weird tools that can only be used with something in the box and then they start trying immediately to do that easy assembly? They haven't bothered to read the instructions because after all, the label said “easy to assemble”, so if it's easy why do you need instructions. This is something that I have spent many times observing because in our household, that was Wayne's approach to assembly. While he was doing that, I was trying to decipher the instructions which often also were not so easy to decipher. Sometimes, he really didn't need the instructions, but then there were those times when it would have been easier on both of us, if he had at least glanced at them first. There is another common area where the approach may really complicate a process. Do you remember the problem of finding a new destination before the days of GPS, when maps were your only guide without stopping to ask directions? I spent many trips sitting in the passenger's seat trying to get Wayne to stop and ask for directions because somehow we had missed a turn shown on the map. The street or road we were looking were had not appeared on the route we were taking. It was obvious, to me at least, that we were lost. Sometimes we just don't want to accept an obvious conclusion or solution and thus we complicate matters for ourselves. Sometimes we go to the other extreme, preferring to over simplify a situation. We often have this inclination to just look at the surface of an issue-- especially if looking deeper means we need to change or alter our behavior or approach to the matter. These were some thoughts which came to me as I was studying the various passages selected by the lectionary for this week's re-entry into Mark's gospel. Each week there are four suggested texts, and I try to utilize each of them in some portion of our service—and I try to see an underlying theme which might connect them. What do these reflections I began with have to do with our Scripture, you might ask? Well, it seems to me that three of our four texts this morning have to do with instructions and following directions. This key theme first appears in Psalm 15, verse 1: “O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?” The answer to this question is central to our relationship with the Lord. And quite frankly, an answer is also found in the remaining verses beginning with: “Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors.” This is a formula for living together in community according to God's plans and purposes. These verses are not the actual instructions or commandments given to the chosen people on the wilderness journey, but they are pointing out of the behavior which results from a way of life based on God's revelation about their relationship within the covenant. These verses do not proscribe ritual acts of self consecration, but challenge the worshiper to self examination of their conscience with regard to their relationship to God and others. They contemplate the connection between one's worship and one's choices in the world—this contemplation asks has a way of life that shows wholehearted respect for the torah of God been adopted? From the first the covenant God made with those led out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land has included instructions—for this way of living. The passage from Deuteronomy 4 which occurs earlier in Hebrew Scripture than do the Psalms is an exhortation to the people---“Israel, give heed to the statutes and

ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord, your God with which I am charging you.” This passage is from one of the last speeches that Moses gave the people. It occurs near the end of the wilderness journey. It is a repetition of the instructions God has tried to impress upon the people since early in their forty year journey. The revelation about the behavior God desires has not changed, neither has the tendency of the people to fail to follow those instructions revealed to them about how to be in community with God and each other. It seems to me that this history of our problems in actually walking as the psalmist illustrates is at the core of the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees and some of the scribes which is found in our gospel passage. In this conversation Jesus is clearly defining an issue which is interfering in the relationship between the people and God. This complication is rooted in what they have chosen to focus on in their relationship—the dietary and other cleanliness rituals which have become so important in their tradition. This conversation begins when the Pharisees begin questioning Jesus about a particular behavior of his disciples which they have observed—something that in their view is totally unsuitable—the disciples are eating with defiled hands, which Mark notes means eating without washing them. However, the term as used here doesn’t just mean unclean as in their hands were dirty, but unclean as in ritually unclean or unholy. Our culture also frowns upon eating without washing our hands, but in our context that is not something that is unholy—only unhealthy. But as Mark continues to explain the issue as presented by the Pharisees, it is clear that this practice has become integral to their religious practices—their standard for religious righteousness and faithfulness to God is now being measured through adherence to these cleanliness standards about their food and the utensils they use. These items which must remain ritually pure—handled and prepared in a certain way act as a symbol—an indication of their faithfulness to God. Jesus’ response is to call the Pharisees hypocrites. He does this by quoting from the prophet Isaiah (29: 13) where earlier in their history God is admonishing the people for the way they are worshiping: “The Lord said: Because these people draw near me with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote;...” Literally Isaiah says the people are worshiping according to human precepts, not divine ordinances. Jesus goes on to illustrate this point to the Pharisees by saying, “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” Jesus points out a particular practice the priest have begun by declaring what they have as “Corban”, that is something dedicated to God. Corban offerings are used only to support the priests and the temple, so they are not supporting their parents according to the commandment of honoring their father and mother found in the Torah. This Jesus says is only one example of the way they have substituted their traditions for the revelations about what God desires their community life to look like. Jesus tells the Pharisees what they have done is “thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on.” Jesus goes on to explain that this substitution of human things for what God desires is the true uncleanliness. Next Jesus calls to the crowd and directs his comments to this wider audience. “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” After leaving the crowd, Jesus discusses this with his disciples wanting to make sure that they understand what he meant. “Do you not

see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" 'And he said, "It is what that comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'" Now the author of Mark adds a notation—an interpretation of what Jesus says when he inserts the comment that "thus he declared all foods clean." This teaching and concept was used by the early Christians to abandon the Jewish dietary restrictions and cleanliness rituals, but is that really what point Jesus is trying to make? The defiling things which Jesus names have nothing to do with what or how one eats. Jesus is speaking about the behaviors—the actions which come from the actions of the people—from their hearts. The behaviors, not things, that Jesus names are those things people do that cause harm to others. Our passage from the Letter of James also addresses this issue beginning by speaking of the source of all goodness—it comes down as a gift from above from God. James then urges his audience to certain actions: "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." We often view the Pharisees as evil, but we have more in common with them and with those Israelites than we like to admit. And at the root of this commonality is our tendency to handle our relationship with God much as we do those two methods of problem solving that I began with. The amazing grace and love of God is hard for us to comprehend; and not comprehending, we have a tendency not to fully trust. We like the Pharisees create our own measures of faithfulness and judge others by whether or not they measure up. If we simply placed our trust in God's grace and followed the instructions given for our relationship with God and with each other—our lives would be much less complicated and our communal life would be loving and full of joy. The Pharisees sought to make adherence to God's covenant expectations something that could be judged and measured superficially—a faithful observance to ritual rather than the actions demonstrating the love of God for all abiding within. As followers of Christ we strive to imitate the life he demonstrated, we need to hold fast to our trust in God's pronouncements of what God desires, not the ones we have created in the hopes of demonstrating our faithfulness. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.