2026-11-08 Small Group Guide

Small Group Guide
Based on the Sermon: "The Struggle to Stay Clean" (Mark 7)
Overview

This sermon draws from Mark 7 to examine the difference between outward religious performance and genuine inward holiness. Using the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees as a backdrop, the message challenges us to honestly inventory what we are holding onto, what we are letting go of, and where our hearts truly stand before God.

Key Passage

Mark 7:1-23

Jesus confronts the Pharisees for honoring God with their lips while their hearts remain far from him. He draws on Isaiah's prophecy to expose the danger of replacing God's commands with human traditions, and he shifts the conversation from outward ritual cleanliness to the condition of the heart.

Key Takeaways

Outward religious behavior does not equal inward holiness. The Pharisees performed elaborate rituals to appear clean before others, but Jesus called them hypocrites, a word rooted in the idea of a stage actor wearing a mask.

Human traditions can quietly replace God's commands. We often do not notice when personal habits, cultural norms, or comfortable routines begin to crowd out what God has clearly called us to do.

What comes out of us reveals what is inside us. Jesus lists evil thoughts, greed, deceit, arrogance, slander, and sexual immorality as things that originate in the heart and make a person genuinely unclean.

Sanctification requires surrender, not just desire. Wanting to be a better

Christian without being willing to change is not growth. The Christian life is designed to be walked alongside Christ, combining our small efforts with his strength.

Confession and brokenness are the path to restoration. Drawing from Psalm 51, the sermon reminds us that God is drawn to a broken and contrite heart, not a polished performance.

Discussion Questions

Opening (Getting Comfortable)

When you were growing up, what was a household rule or tradition that felt very important at the time but that you now realize had little lasting significance? What made it feel so important then?

The sermon opens with a reflection on Operation Christmas Child and how easily we can roll our eyes at something genuinely meaningful. Can you think of a time when you dismissed something good because it felt like a gimmick or an obligation? What changed your perspective, or what would it take to change it?

Going Deeper (Into the Scripture)

Jesus quotes Isaiah, describing people who honor God with their lips while their hearts are far from him. On a practical, everyday level, what does that gap between lips and heart look like in modern life? Where do you see it most clearly in yourself?

The sermon makes the point that the Pharisees were not washing their hands to be clean but to be seen. Where in your own spiritual life do you find yourself doing the right thing for the wrong audience?

Read Mark 7:20-23 together. Jesus lists specific things that come out of the heart and make a person unclean. Which of those items on the list surprised you most, and which one felt most personally convicting?

The pastor says, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." What is the difference between a tradition that supports your faith and a tradition that quietly replaces it? How do you tell the difference in your own life?

The sermon describes the Christian life as a tug-of-war between the son or daughter of your earthly parent and the son or daughter of God. What does that internal tug feel like in your daily decisions? Where is the rope being pulled hardest right now?

Getting Personal (Honest Reflection)

The pastor challenges the group to make two lists: what I naturally do and like to do versus what I know is more important and should do. If you were to make those two lists honestly, what would appear on each side? You do not have to share everything, but what is one item from each list you would be willing to name?

The sermon asks, "When was the last time you woke up in the morning and said, God, what is your will?" How would you honestly answer that question? What gets in the way of starting the day with that kind of posture?

The pastor references 1 Thessalonians 5, where Paul calls believers to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances, and then identifies this as God's will for us in Christ Jesus. Does knowing that this is described as God's will change how you think about it? Why or why not?

Outward Focus (Beyond Ourselves)

The sermon raises the concern that we cannot raise our children to be godly if we do not know what God is like ourselves. Whether you have children or not, who in your life is watching how you live? How does that responsibility shape the way you think about your own spiritual condition?

Operation Christmas Child is offered in the sermon as one creative way to

share the gospel with people we will never meet. What is one way your group could collectively act on the call to love others sacrificially, not when it is convenient, but as a deliberate, prayerful choice?

Practical Applications

This Week, Choose One:

Write out Mark 7:8 each day this week: "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." At the end of each day, ask yourself honestly where that showed up in your day.

Read Psalm 51 slowly and prayerfully. Let it serve as a personal confession before God. Notice what David asks for and what he offers in return.

Identify one locked room in your heart, one area you have not given God full access to, and bring it before him in prayer this week. If you feel comfortable, share it with a trusted person in your group and ask them to pray with you.

Take an honest inventory of your daily priorities. Write down what your schedule and spending actually say about what you value, and compare that list to what you say you believe. Bring what you find back to God.

If you have not yet participated in Operation Christmas Child or a similar outreach, consider doing so this week not as an obligation but as a prayerful act of generosity toward someone you will never meet.

Closing Prayer Focus

Spend a few minutes in group prayer, asking God to reveal what is truly in your hearts, not to condemn, but to restore. Invite him into those rooms that have been locked. Use the language of Psalm 51 as a guide: ask for a clean heart, a renewed spirit, and the joy of his salvation restored.

For Further Study

Psalm 51 -- David's prayer of confession and restoration after his sin with Bathsheba
Matthew 5-7 -- The Sermon on the Mount, including Jesus's expansion of the law to address the heart
Acts 10:9-16 -- Peter's vision and God's declaration about what is truly clean
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 -- Rejoice, pray, give thanks; this is God's will for you
Romans 12:1-2 -- The call to offer ourselves as living sacrifices and to be transformed by the renewing of the mind