

Mark 7

V.1-5 The critical eye and heart of the religious.

The end of Mark 6 and beginning of Mark 7 encapsulates the rhythm of Jesus' earthly ministry. His grace, compassion, warmth and love for the multitudes met with the criticality, and legalism of the religious establishment.

We find Jesus serving, loving, healing, teaching, delivering hope and then we also see him confronted by and responding to those upholding the heavy hand of rote tradition, ceremony, and law.

The great thing about when this happens is that Jesus is super clear about what is and isn't true. He does not allow the Pharisees to paint their way as the way, or even a way - but challenges them down to their core, publicly, on what it means to pursue God and to be pursued by God.

The event we see in these verses sets the stage for Jesus' instruction on holiness and defilement, or uncleanness.

We find here that Jesus was not observed or heard with a heart of openness by many of the religious leaders but a heart to find fault, to sow discord.

This particular incident begins with a critical spirit among the Pharisees who found fault with the disciples for not washing their hands - particularly in a special ceremonial fashion that was adopted by the especially religious.

This “special way” that Mark writes about was not required by the scriptures but it was expected by the traditionalists. A good Jewish person “WOULD” do these things.

Really, this ceremonial washing was less about cleanliness - everybody wash your hands! - and more about communicating, non-verbally, to others just how holy that person doing the washing is, just how different, unique, and special they are.

It becomes exclusionary - “we who do these things are more favored than you dirty outsiders.”

This is a spirit we must resist in our age.

V.6-13 Rebuke for hypocrisy and teaching the commandments of men as doctrine

Pharisee means - separated ones, those who are separate. They were intending to show that they were separate from the world, from sin, but Jesus teaches them that they are separated from God!

Jesus tells them that they have actually “laid aside” the commandment of God, God’s instructions, in favor of their own creation.

And what we know from history and personal experience is that when this occurs that is when faith groups, churches, believers go off the rails.

What began as a sincere attempt to honor God to draw close to God, to keep Him in our memory, becomes vanity, empty ritual, and actually builds distance between the believer and God.

And in this case we even see that the Pharisees, those men who were supposed to be spiritual leaders in their culture were actually using their contrived spirituality for their own benefit.

Jesus illustrates this by noting how they would avoid caring for their parents by “dedicating” their earnings, their money, to the temple - this was called “Corban,” and Mark translates that for us as “a gift to God.”

Vine tells us in regards to this Corban, or gift, that, “a saying of the Rabbis was, ‘It is hard for the parents, but the law is clear, vows must be kept.’

By ostensibly dedicating their money or possessions to the temple that person avoids the scriptural imperative to honor their father and mother by caring for them, but comes off looking like a saint because they are dedicating their possessions to God.

The actual paying of those vows was probably diverse in motive, and follow-through - as it is when we make vows to God today.

And whether they actually paid their vows or not, Jesus is saying that it is better to follow God's commandment and to honor God by honoring our parents rather than participating in a man-made custom that was invented to compel people to give.

Not only that! Jesus says, "many such things you do."

Their wickedness, painted as holiness, was just the tip of the iceberg.

Many more sins were and are painted in the veneer of faith - causing confusion, hurting people, and ultimately creating space between God and His people.

How do we know the difference between the traditions of men and doctrine? We must know God's Word. We must also acknowledge that this teaching of Jesus is not one note, it is complex.

We find ourselves asking - "Are all traditions bad?" And wrestling with Paul's words to the Corinthians and the Thessalonians.

[1Co 11:2 NKJV] 2 Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered [them] to you.

[2Th 2:15 NKJV] 15 Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.

There are meaningful traditions that we do without ever giving a second thought!

We close our eyes when we pray? That's not clearly prescribed in scripture and many times Jesus looked up to the heavens!

Paul wrote [1Ti 2:8 NKJV] I desire therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands...

One samaritan leper whom Jesus had healed: [Luk 17:16 NKJV] ...and fell down on [his] face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan.

The method or physical posture of our prayers is traditional - so no, not all traditions are bad.

But our traditions become bad or unhealthy when they become exclusionary, when they are taking over, supplanting the place of Christ as the center of our worship. That should never be the case.

What about eating or drinking certain foods and beverages?

[Col 2:16-17, 20-23 NKJV] 16 ...let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, 17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. ... 20 Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as [though] living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations-- 21 "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," 22 which all concern things which perish with the using--according to the commandments and doctrines of men? 23 These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, [false] humility, and neglect of the body, [but are] of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

Paul writes much more about this in Romans 14, I encourage much study on this topic - here is an excerpt: [Rom 14:14 NKJV]

14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that [there is] nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him [it is] unclean.

But let us return to Jesus' instruction on the matter, from which we know that Paul, having been a Pharisee came to know.

V.14-23 The source of sin, defilement, uncleanness is within

Interestingly as Jesus expounds on the source of defilement - from within rather than without - his own disciples have questions about this. Perhaps some of them did follow the traditions of the elders, or perhaps they aspired to do those things.

So here they are asking for further clarification - what do you mean Lord?

Contextually Jesus is talking about food. There were many laws regulating foods for the Jewish people, and many ways by which one might become ceremonially unclean - even unintentionally.

[Mat 23:23-26 NKJV] 23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier [matters] of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. 24 "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! 25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 "Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.

The point Jesus illustrated in Matthew was that the Pharisees went to extraordinary lengths to be considered "sanctified," even paying attention to the microscopic, invisible, or incidental pollution they might encounter while neglecting HUGE doctrines - justice, mercy, faith.

As if straining a gnat out of their cup in order to remain ceremonially clean would eventually cover the requirement for faith.

We can take this to an extreme for purposes of illustration - what about drugs and alcohol? Are they bad? Consider that what Jesus teaches is that the object itself isn't evil - the people involved are.

The objects are just that - inanimate - creations of wicked people, made to serve a wicked end.

Benadryl, or other allergy medicines - wonderful medications to assist with seasonal allergies! BUT, somebody else can cook it into meth! Terrible! The evil heart of man is at work.

To a more complete view Jesus teaches us that it is the heart of man that devises these schemes and worse schemes than drugs, alcohol, non-kosher meals, or unwashed hands - evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.

Where are these contrived? On the counter? At the store? At a meth house? No, they are near to us - in each of us. Our own hearts.

[Jer 17:9 NKJV] 9 "The heart [is] deceitful above all [things], And desperately wicked; Who can know it? [Jer 17:10 NKJV] 10 I, the LORD, search the heart, [I] test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings.

[Jas 1:14-15 NKJV] 14 But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. 15 Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

That's why the gospels are so amazing because in light of all that - the darkness that lives within humanity - Jesus moves among us, desiring to remove the sin, remove the evil thoughts, and fill that vacated space with a Spirit of Holiness.

V.24-30 Jesus' interaction with a gentile

This is a challenging passage for some.

It makes Jesus appear aloof, distant, unapproachable. But remember this passage doesn't stand on its own in a vacuum. The person and work of Christ is informed by the totality of who

He is. AND, what we find in this interaction does not diminish Jesus' heart for people - the opposite in fact.

As Jesus is approached by a gentile woman - her faith is tested by Jesus' lack of instantaneous response -- ever been there?

He also teaches her about His ministry - an incredible teaching moment for her, to hear intimated from the Master's lips that God has a special plan for Israel and Jesus is concerned about that!

I wonder how many of our prayers that have gone unanswered as we desired, or that we have been challenged by Jesus' apparent lack of response that He has been trying to teach something about His larger, broader, universal work?

What this woman expresses though in v.28 is a heart of humility. She doesn't feel entitled. She recognizes her need, and her utter helplessness without Him. Lest he feed her, she would starve.

She demonstrates that poverty of spirit that Jesus proclaims as blessed in Matt 5.

He is so moved by this that He grants her plea and does so without even leaving the place he is in. In doing so, he also validates this woman's faith in him.

Imagine the question that she may have had when Jesus told her to go her way that her daughter was well -- how could she possibly know but to rely solely on Jesus' word?

How her faith must have been even more bolstered by what she found at her home!

And in this we see that Jesus cared for gentiles as well - which we also see in John 4, with the Samaritan woman.

V.31-37 Jesus heals - commands life

Jesus opens our ears and mouths too