

Mark 7

An Outline

- I. That Which Defiles (Mark 7:1-23)
- II. Jesus Honors a Syrophenician Woman's Faith (Mark 7:24-30)
- III. Jesus Heals a Deaf and Mute Man (Mark 7:31-37)

Issues for Discussion

1. **Honoring the Word of God (Mathew 7:1-23)** – The Pharisees and the teachers of the law saw some of Jesus's disciples eating without first washing their hands. The religious leaders followed the tradition of certain Jewish elders, who taught them that unless they washed their hands, their hands would be defiled and then whatever they ate would be defiled as well.

Jesus first taught a general principle and then addressed the specific issue. First, Jesus criticized the religious leaders for elevating human traditions over the Word of God. He cited their tradition of excusing children from honoring their parents when they dedicated their money to God (called *corban* or "money devoted to God"). The biblical command was "Honor your mother and father" (cf. Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5). Devoting money to God was only their tradition. Thus, by promoting their tradition they nullified the Word of God. This was only one example of many.

The issue of eating with unwashed hands was another example. In this case, they wrongfully condemned the disciples. Jesus argued that people were not defiled by what goes into the body but what comes out of the heart. Even though they ate with unwashed hands, whatever uncleanness was attached to their food would eventually be expelled from the body. So then, all food was clean because no food could be defiled by unwashed hands. Some have taken Mark 7:19 (NIV – "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean") to imply that Jesus was abrogating the Jewish dietary laws. This is an unnecessary and eisegetical (i.e. "reading into the text") conclusion. In the context, it is sufficient to simply understand Jesus as saying that no food (among the legitimate food allowed by the Mosaic Law) was made unclean because they were handled by unwashed hands. This understanding is validated by the parallel passage in Matthew 15:20.

The abrogation of the Jewish dietary laws would not happen here but at the crucifixion of Christ, where His death would cause the whole Old Covenant Mosaic Law to be replaced by the New Covenant (cf. Hebrews 11). At that point, not only the dietary laws but every ceremonial, civil and moral law of the Old Testament would be made obsolete and replaced by the principles of the New Covenant, aka, the Law of Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:20-21), the law of the Spirit who gives life (Romans 8:2), or the law that gives freedom (James 1:25).

A Warning Against Misguided Christian Interpretation – Some read the citation from Isaiah

29:13 in Mark 7:6-7 in two extreme and wrong ways: (1) First, they read it as an attack on all church tradition. Jesus did not criticize all tradition but only the practice of prioritizing human tradition over the Word of God. We celebrate Easter and Christmas. These are good human traditions adopted by the church; however, when we judge a fellow believer for not celebrating them, we go too far. These are not commanded by God, nor are they even “biblical” traditions. What is more, these very traditions have become so commercialized that they sometimes take away from the sanctity and significance of the events they were designed to commemorate.

(2) Secondly, we take Isaiah’s words, “their hearts are far from me,” to create a theology of the heart over the mind, the spirit over the letter, symbolic truth over literal truth. There should be no dichotomy between the heart and the mind or between the spirit and the letter, and there is a danger of elevating the symbolic over the literal because we risk making truth subjective and relative rather than what is divine and absolute. Jesus was not criticizing the religious leaders for taking God’s commands literally but for adding to and taking away from and changing God’s commands, which the Law itself prohibited (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32). The way that the religious leaders were simply giving lip service to God without truly worshiping from their hearts was that they were elevating their invented ideas of what is good (“human traditions”) over God’s clear commands in Scripture.

Let’s look at Jesus’s example a little more closely. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees at a time when the law of the tithe was in full effect, and He was not at this time negating it (cf. Luke 11:42). The law of the tithe, along with the rest of the Mosaic Law, would not be made obsolete until Jesus died, for every covenant required a death to replace and ratify it with a new covenant (cf. Romans 7:1-6). Yet, Jesus told the Pharisees that they were wrong for releasing people from their duty to honor their parents (with money) by simply devoting it to God. It appears that the Pharisees were not content to simply follow the Law with respect to the tithe but declared that ANY amount, even beyond the tithe, could be devoted to God, and this would take precedence over whatever obligation the children had to take care of their parents. This was going beyond the law of the tithe while negating the command of God regarding the honoring of parents.

Someone at my last church once asked me about a predicament he faced. He wanted to tithe, but his parents were poor and needed money from him to pay for their utilities and such. What should he do? He felt conflicted. I reminded him of 2 Corinthians 9:7, which governs New Testament giving. Giving must not be under compulsion but cheerfully done. There is no post-cross New Testament command to tithe but the command to honor our parents, even to provide for them, is repeated and reinforced under the New Covenant Law of Christ (Ephesians 6:1-3; 1 Timothy 5:8).

Again, another person asked me what they should do. They were indebted to someone, and paying steep fees, but they also wanted to tithe their income to the church. The Scripture teaches that God does not require us to give from what we do not have but from what we have (2 Corinthians 8:12). When we are indebted to another person, that money is money we do not have, for it belongs to another. Jesus also taught in the Sermon on the Mount that if someone has something against us, we need to get it right before we offer our gift to God (Matthew 5:23-24). Now, this could be any issue or offense, but could it not also be a monetary offense? A person is offended because you owe them money, which you have not repaid. Are we not to resolve this offense first before we come and offer our gift to God? What is more, the New

Covenant command is that we ought not to be in debt to anyone (Romans 13:8).

2. **“Jesus Calls A Woman a Dog” (Matthew 7:24-30)** – That might be the click-bait headline today, and it would completely miss the point. This is why we often feel bombarded by “fake news.” Even though the words, events, people may have been present in a given situation, what is left out, distorted, and exaggerated often overshadow the truth of what really happened or what was truly meant. Jesus never went anywhere without a definite purpose. He purposefully traveled through Samaria on His way to Galilee. So here, He purposefully traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He wanted to escape the crowds but the occasion also provided the opportunity for Him to meet a Canaanite woman. This woman was a Greek (a Gentile) and associated with a people group that the Jews historically despised, namely, the Canaanites. This woman had a daughter, who was demon-possessed. Even though she sought Jesus’s attention, He did not give it right away. Her persistent and desperate pleas even drew the consternation of the disciples, so that they asked Jesus to send her away. I believe this was exactly the situation Jesus wanted both to draw out the faith of the woman and provide instruction for His disciples.

Jesus gave the standard line: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” The disciples would have no problem with this, for that is what every good Jew believed. The Messiah came for the Jews. But this woman persisted, even calling him the “Son of David,” a recognized Messianic title (Matthew 15:22). This Gentile woman knew about the Jewish Messiah. Again, Jesus gave the standard line, albeit with just a slight variation: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” He does not use the standard pejorative term for dog (*kuon*, e.g. Matthew 7:6) but the affectionate term for a pet (*kunarion*). Still, He was not accepting her request. But then, she responded with something profound: “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In other words, she was not denying His mission to the Jews but acknowledging that Jesus was their (as Gentiles) only hope as well, even if it meant getting only scraps.

Then, Jesus did something unexpected. He granted her request. In Matthew we are told He said, “You have great faith!” (Matthew 15:28). What a contrast to all the time that Jesus criticized His own disciples for having little to no faith. What a contrast to the Jewish leaders and even the people in His own hometown, who would not believe. I believe Jesus was giving His disciples a lesson on faith as something that would take priority to ethnic privilege. Jesus would marvel (i.e. He was pleasantly surprised) at the FAITH of a Roman centurion and this Syro-Phoenician woman while He marveled (i.e. He was sadly shocked) at the UNFAITH of the children of Israel (cf. Matthew 8:10-12). Paul would later argue that by this faith we have ourselves become children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7).

This reminds me of Jonah. God told Jonah to preach to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, the ruthless and godless enemy of Israel. When Jonah did not want God’s mercy on them, God tried to reason with him. God showed him that he was concerned about a plant that he did not tend or make grow but which sprang up overnight and died overnight, yet should God not be concerned with Nineveh, with over 120,000 people, who were never taught to have any moral sense of right and wrong, not to mention their animals? When they heard Jonah’s preaching, the Ninevites humbled themselves and desperately sought the Lord, just like the Syro-Phoenician woman desperately sought Jesus’s attention and healing. How could He turn a blind eye to her?! How could God ignore the humbling and faith of the Ninevites?

Finally, let us not get too caught up in Jesus's method. He may not appear to us to be "politically correct" in the way He addressed the woman, but Jesus was never for political correctness. Just ask the Pharisees, who criticized Him for blasphemy when He told one of the men He healed, "Your sins are forgiven." He was not politically correct when He told the wealthy potential donor to His ministry, "Sell everything, give it to the poor, then come follow Me." He was not politically correct when He told the Jews, who were ready to make Him king, you must now eat my flesh and drink my blood, causing them to be puzzled and then ultimately to stop following Him.

He drove away many who appeared interested in following Him and could grant Him credentials and credibility but attracted those who were hurting and needy and desperate for help, those that could hardly give Him anything or add much to His ministry. He was not so much interested in what anyone brought to Him but who God gave to Him. His priority was always God and His will and never human calculation.

3. **Jesus used His fingers and spit to heal (Mark 7:31-37)** – Jesus traveled from Phoenicia (Tyre to Sidon) back to the Sea of Galilee and then to the region of the Decapolis, a place inhabited by many Gentiles and where He had previously healed a man possessed by a legion of demons. Perhaps the healed man Jesus left there had done well in spreading the news about Jesus among the Gentiles. It is unclear whether Jews or Gentiles came to Him here bringing the deaf and mute man. When Jesus healed the man, He chose an unorthodox method. He put His fingers into the man's ears and put His spit on the man's tongue. It has been noted that Jesus never did any miracle exactly the same way. Perhaps the Lord wanted to demonstrate that there was no particular method or incantation or ritual to His healing. He could use anything or nothing at all. Since no two miracles were alike, no one could easily explain the miracle away, for every miracle was different. Again, as always, the people were amazed.

Jesus again told the people not to spread the news, but they do. Again, His intent was not to stir up a crowd or to encourage those who wanted to make Him king. His time to die had not yet come. He understood the religious leaders were looking for a reason to kill Him. He did not want to give them one. Jesus's active attempt not to get killed before His time should be instructive for those who think they need to do nothing to escape persecution or trouble when serving the Lord. Both Jesus and Paul took active measures to escape and avoid trouble even while embracing it when it was God's will. This did not take anything away from their faith in God to accomplish His will.

Discussion Question

Jesus criticized the religious leaders, citing Isaiah 29:13, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." How might we also be guilty of this? What does it look like when we honor God from our hearts?