

**Trinity Baptist Church Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> May 2021**

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**Mark 7:1-30 'Jesus' Priorities: Not Who You Are, But What's In Your Heart'**

We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, asking ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" And what difference does who he is make to your life? We read a slightly longer passage today from Mark 6:30-44.

**[Read Mark 7:1-30]**

*1The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus 2and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. 3(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4When they come from the market-place they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)*

*5So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, 'Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?'*

*6He replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:*

*"These people honour me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.*

*7They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are merely human rules."*

*8You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.'*

*9And he continued, 'You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! 10For Moses said, "Honour your father and mother," and, "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death." 11But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God) – 12then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. 13Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.'*

*14Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.*

*15(16)Nothing outside you can defile you by going into you. Rather, it is what comes out of you that defiles you.'*

*17After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. 18'Are you so dull?' he asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters you from the outside can defile you? 19For it doesn't go into your heart but into you stomach, and then out of your body.' (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)*

*20He went on: 'What comes out of you is what defiles you. 21For from within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts – sexual immorality, theft, murder, 22adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23All these evils come from inside and defile you.'*

*24Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. 25In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. 26The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.*

27'First let the children eat all they want,' he told her, 'for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.'

28'Lord,' she replied, 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

29Then he told her, 'For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.'

30She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

### [Pray]

It is somewhat cowardly to attack a person *indirectly* through their followers. Yet this was not the first time that the Pharisees employed such a tactic to challenge Jesus' legitimacy. In 2:16, they asked his *disciples*, not him, why he ate with tax collectors and sinners. And in 2:24, they complained to Jesus because his *disciples* were plucking and eating ears of corn on the Sabbath. Here, again, they challenged Jesus as to why his *disciples* ate without first ceremonially washing their hands. Since a teacher was considered responsible for his disciples' behaviour, the implication is clear: in their eyes his teaching was not legitimate, because his disciples were breaking their tradition which they taught as though it were God's Law.

Interestingly, in all three cases, the controversy surrounds food. And that is actually not surprising. For, the Old Testament food laws, which these Pharisaic traditions may have originally been created to ringfence, were one of the key reminders to the Jews of their privileged difference from other peoples – their status as God's chosen people. To eat with foreigners, or even with Israelites who were known to be sinners, was to ritually defile oneself – to make oneself unworthy of contact with God.

And the Old Testament food laws also served as a visual reminder of God's holiness, and the reverence with which he must be approached. Only those who were ritually clean could enter God's dwelling place – the Temple. Now God had declared many animals unclean for Jews, including such things as rats, geckos, and lizards. But the problem was that something could be rendered unclean inadvertently. Leviticus 11:32 declares, "When one of [these animals] dies and falls on something, that article, whatever its use, will be unclean ... Put it in water; it will be unclean till evening, and then it will be clean." Similarly, contact with unclean *people* could render something unclean until it was washed (Leviticus 15:11-12). So how could a Jew know that something at the marketplace had not inadvertently been rendered unclean? Surely it would be safest to ceremonially wash *everything*!

That may or may not be how this tradition got started. But, by Jesus' day, this practice of washing had probably taken on a more sinister motive, not least because it was no longer confined to the washing of pots, but also included the washing of persons. You see, at the marketplace, a Jew would likely encounter Gentiles – non-Jews. And they regarded Gentiles as unclean and therefore vastly inferior. Therefore, they must wash off the uncleanness of coming into contact with filthy Gentiles before eating, or they might become contaminated themselves. In other words, this ritual washing had significant undertones of racial supremacy and exclusion.

It's an issue that has many echoes today. This week saw the anniversary of George Floyd's death. Yet, just a couple of weeks ago, the Texas State parliament voted through a law that effectively bans any schoolteacher from teaching about racial privilege or prejudice, and excuses any teacher from having to undertake training in cultural understanding if it makes them feel any "discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of

psychological distress.” The Pharisees were by no means the first or the last to seek to reinforce racial privilege through legalese.

So, Jesus’ refusal to abide by these Pharisaic traditions was an implicit challenge to this attitude of racial supremacy. Though, as we shall see shortly, he did accept the special privilege and priority that God gave to his chosen people, yet he also knew what is abundantly clear in the Old Testament Scriptures (if one is willing to see it) that through the Messiah the privileges afforded to Israel would be opened to people of *all* nations who come to God in faith. That is the context in which we should understand Jesus’ new implicit declaration that all food is clean – it was not the Old Testament laws didn’t ever matter, but rather that the new era of open access to God for *everyone* had begun through him, so the reason behind those laws no longer applied.

But before Jesus addressed that specific point, he first highlighted the more general way in which the Pharisees religiously followed their own man-made traditions, even when at times they contravened God’s revealed word. They were, said Jesus, hypocrites – actors, wearing a mask – because they gave every appearance of seeking to honour God, while in reality their hearts were far from him. To illustrate this point, Jesus cited an unrelated example – the rules they had created surrounding “Corban,” or gifts devoted to God.

Again, such rules may have originally arisen to reinforce Old Testament commands that vows made to God, though voluntary, must be paid in full. Numbers 30:2 says: “When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.” Deuteronomy 23:21 adds that such payment should not be delayed. But the Pharisees had taken this to such a level that vows were used as an excuse for refusing financial assistance to elderly parents in need, thus nullifying God’s clear command to honour father and mother. Nothing could have been further from God’s purpose in the rules he commanded about vows! As with all things, compassion trumps legalism.

So, having highlighted their general hypocrisy in following *their* traditions in contravention of God’s word, Jesus returned to the Pharisees’ specific accusation about eating with unwashed hands. He called the crowd to *listen* because he had something of great importance to say. And here’s the point. The Old Testament food laws were a visual reminder of God’s holiness, but food never truly made a person unclean, because it only actually affects a person’s *physical* being. It does not affect the *heart*, which was seen as the seat of a person’s spiritual and moral life. Food doesn’t make you unclean; a bad heart makes you unclean. Mark notes in passing that, by this statement, Jesus declared all foods clean – because the new era had come through him.

But he also challenged the Pharisees’ primary (and most misguided) assumption about themselves, which was that they were essentially *good*, if only they could keep themselves from becoming contaminated by external forces. Rather, Jesus highlighted that no-one is essentially *good*. We all have evil inside us *already* – except Jesus, of course. We don’t need any outside influence to make us unclean, we’re quite capable of rendering ourselves unclean by our thoughts and actions! If only the Pharisees could have seen and accepted that reality about themselves, they would not have placed themselves outside the reach of Jesus’ salvation!

Contrast their complete lack of understanding and self-awareness with the *Gentile*, Syrophenician woman in the next account, who understood this reality! Mark may well have included this event precisely to make that point, especially as Mark’s Gospel was probably written primarily for a Gentile Christian audience.

Yet, at first glance, this story appears somewhat troubling. For Jesus appears to actually reinforce the Jewish racial prejudice, both in his seeming reluctance to help this foreigner, and in calling her a dog – not a compliment in the slightest in those days! That doesn't fit with the teaching we have just heard, nor with Jesus' command at the end of Mark that his disciples must preach his Gospel throughout the world, such that *all* peoples can be saved. However, if we examine this account more carefully, we find that this was not actually what Jesus was doing. He *was* acknowledging and asking the woman to acknowledge that God's promises were *first* for his chosen people, Israel, and only subsequently to be expanded to welcome in other nations. But he was certainly not, by that, suggesting that God's promises were *only* for Israel. Far from it. Israel was always called to be God's means of blessing the world.

In asking this woman to acknowledge that she had no right to his help, he was testing the goodness of her heart. Was she merely out to get what she could from him, or did she humbly recognise something of who he is – the promised Messiah? Perhaps surprisingly she accepted his description of her as a dog compared to Israel, the children of God's promise. She wasn't asking to be favoured *at Israel's expense*, merely to be given a little of what fell from their table as waste. And because of her faith, demonstrated in such a response, Jesus was more than willing to grant her request and heal her daughter.

Where Israel's own leaders were blind, this Gentile outsider saw clearly! Where their hearts were hard, hers was humble and soft. Which all serves to illustrate Jesus' prior teaching about the heart being what truly makes us unclean. Whilst a bad heart made God's people into kingdom outsiders, a good heart made kingdom outsiders into God's people. Faith and humble obedience are what matter to God. It's not who you are, but what's in your heart that counts.

Yet, in God's grace, even the evil in our hearts can be forgiven and washed clean if we repent of it. So, as we close, let's take a few minutes to slowly read through the list of evils that Jesus outlined in this passage, and ask God to show each of us if there are any of these areas where our heart remains unclean. If he brings anything to mind, take the time to confess it, receive his forgiveness and ask him to help you to live better going forward. "From within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile you."

"Search me, God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting."

**[Quiet reflection. Prayer]**