

Mark 7:1-23 – Living the Word

We can become so familiar with the Gospel accounts of Jesus that we can sometimes miss just how extraordinary and puzzling his words and actions must have seemed. Mark 7:1-23 provides us with just such an example of Jesus' puzzling teaching.

The Background – Jewish traditions regarding the law

Jewish leaders from Jerusalem have come to check out Jesus (v.1). They were those whose job it was to study the Scriptures and to ensure that the Jewish people lived in accordance with its demands. As extra safeguards they had added their own traditions, like a hedge around the law to ensure that it was not broken – a bit like saying don't drive at more than 25 miles per hour then you'll be sure not to break the speed limit.

The accusation – vv. 1-5

Some of these experts saw that Jesus' disciples were eating food without first washing their hands. This was not a hygiene issue but was a matter of religious ceremony – in case you had come in contact with something unclean and this uncleanness were then transferred from your hands via your food into your whole body. So they asked Jesus why his disciples did not keep this tradition.

Jesus' response – vv. 6-13

Look at Jesus' answer to them in verses 6-13. He tells them that their elaborate traditions have become exercises in missing the point. They have innumerable traditions about washing, claiming thereby to protect themselves from transgressing the law of God, but when it suits them they are only too ready to find ways of avoiding the demands of God. They allowed those with money to neglect their duty of providing for elderly parents on the pretence that they intended to devote their money to God – to claim their money was earmarked for God's use and was not available to provide for their parents (vv. 10-12).

Look at Jesus' verdict on these people in verses 6-7. His words are also a challenge to us. There is always a danger with us also that our religion may become more of a matter of outward show than true devotion to God from the heart – a devotion that should find ready expression in help for others. I find Jesus' words in Matthew 23:28 to be a constant challenge, "On the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are filled with hypocrisy and wickedness." It's a good thing others can't see my heart, but I know my own heart and it is here that God needs to reign.

But what I particularly want to draw your attention to is what Jesus has to say in v.13, "You nullify the word of God by your tradition." Jesus is saying that the word which God has spoken may never be set aside; it is the height of arrogance and folly to think that we can do better than God and create a better set of directions by which we should live. On the contrary, we need to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God – we must not add to it, neither may we remove any part of it. God's word may not be set aside because we deem it to be old fashioned or because we (or those around us) think it to be no longer relevant to the day in which we live. God has spoken and it is our task to hear and to obey.

We need to examine ourselves to see if there are areas where we have set aside the word of God in favour of our own, human traditions – even our own Evangelical traditions.

Jesus' extraordinary teaching on food – vv. 14-23

It is against this background that we need to hear the extraordinary words of Jesus in verses 14-23. At first reading, they may appear to be on the same theme: they emphasise that God is concerned with heart religion and heart worship rather than mere outward practice.

But read again verse 13, and then read verses 18b-19 where it is stated that Jesus is making all food clean. Who gave the laws concerning unclean food? It was God. How then can Jesus say that what you eat does not matter? How can Jesus set aside the word of God in favour of his own teaching – his own tradition? In particular, how can he do this after what he has said about the Pharisees?

Some people have pointed out that here Jesus makes himself equal with God. He is able to lay down new law with the same authority as the law God gave long ago. This is quite true and is quite extraordinary – but it is not enough. It is not just that Jesus *adds new* laws; it is rather that he sets aside laws that God had previously given, even though he had just criticised the Jewish leaders for doing this very same thing! How can this be?

Jesus is not merely declaring that he is equal with God. Jesus is also declaring that with his coming into the world a new age has dawned. The God-given signs and ceremonies that marked the Old Testament age have been swept away at his coming because they have now found their fulfilment in him and in what he is doing.

This must have been very difficult for his first hearers to understand. It was very difficult for them to come to terms with what Jesus had said about the food laws. Remember the way in which Peter in Acts 10 protests vehemently when invited by God to kill and eat from the unclean animals offered him in a vision (see Acts 10:9-16).

The sweeping away of much of the Old Testament law It may seem obvious to us because it has become embedded in our practice as Christians. God commanded his people to offer regular sacrifices for sin, but when did we last offer an animal in sacrifice? We understand that these things find their fulfilment in Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We understand that in *not* offering animal sacrifice we are embracing the Word of God rather than rejecting it. But because this is such a commonplace to us we fail to see just how extraordinary and perplexing the words of Jesus must have seemed as he seems first to condemn the Jewish leaders for setting aside God's commandments and then seems to do precisely the same himself.

But Jesus is not setting aside God's word concerning clean and unclean animals in favour of a new tradition. He is showing that a new age has dawned and the old shadows have been swept away in the light of the realities of the kingdom that he is building.

Why did God give commands concerning clean and unclean animals? It is nothing to do with hygiene nor is it simply about pigs. If you look carefully at the food laws given in Leviticus 11 you will see that it is part of the holiness code by which God was calling his people to be distinct and separate from the nations around them. The code makes it clear that things that are 'half-and-half', half one thing and half another, are to be rejected. God demanded complete separation. For instance, they were not to sow a field with two kinds of seed or to make a garment with two kinds of thread (Leviticus 19:19). Neither were they to eat animals that, for instance, have a split hoof but do not chew the cud – an animal viewed to be half one thing and half another. God was teaching his people that holiness meant separation – even physical separation from the people around them. The food laws were both a visual aid concerning the importance of separation and were also part of Israel's culture that kept them apart from the nations around them – they could not eat with other peoples.

But with the arrival of Jesus a new age has dawned. God's kingdom is breaking in among all the nations of the earth. The dividing wall between Jew and Gentile will be broken down through Jesus death and resurrection. Through the power of the outpoured Spirit God will create for himself a people from every tribe and nation. Holiness is not a matter of physical separation from those who are unholy, but of the inner transformation of the heart.

How shall we then live?

God calls us not to be separate from others in terms of the peculiarity of our outward habits but in our moral likeness to Jesus Christ. He calls us to be a transformed and a transforming people. To be like that we need both to watch our own hearts and to live out our lives among those who do not know Christ. The great challenge for us is transformation and not isolation.

As we have seen, Jesus changes everything. In particular, he changes the way we must read Scripture. We must not read the Bible woodenly as if it were a set of timeless rules or even timeless doctrine. The Bible provides us with the script of the great drama of salvation, a drama which centres in Christ and in which we too are caught up as part of the action, called to play our part in bringing in the kingdom. We are not only to declare the good news concerning Christ but, like Jesus, we are to embody the message: we are to *be* good news for the world.

The kingdom has come, and this word is to shape our lives from the inside out and to empower us to be a transforming people for the sake of a needy world. As DL Moody put it, "One person in 100 will read the Bible, the other 99 will read the Christian."

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