

Mark 7 – Traditions and Commandments

THEME: Pharisees denounced; Syrophoenician's demon–possessed daughter; deaf and dumb of Decapolis.

This chapter carries out the theme of Mark, which is to show that the Lord Jesus is God's Servant who is doing God's will. He is a man of action, and He is doing the things that would appeal to the Roman of that day and to any person who is interested in getting a job done. That is the wonderful thing about Him as a Savior; He can save, and He is the only One who can.

The intertestamental period is that time between the close of the Old Testament and the opening of the New Testament in which many changes took place. It was one of the most eventful periods in the history of the nation Israel. During the time of their captivity and in this period between the Testaments after they had returned to the land, there was a development of new groups and parties not mentioned in the Old Testament. There were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes, and the Herodians.

Scribes—the scribes had a good beginning. Evidently Ezra was a scribe and the founder of that group. They were the professional expounders of the Law. However, by the time of our Lord they had become “hairsplitters” and were more concerned with the letter of the Law than with the spirit of the Law.

That, I think, is one of the great problems we have today. There has been put into the interpretation of the laws in this country this “hairsplitting” method and the philosophical interpretation that was never intended in the law. I believe that is what has come out of certain law schools in the East. As a result, our legal system and our political system are in the mess we find today. That is what happened to religion in our Lord's day.

Pharisees—the Pharisees also had a good beginning. They arose to defend the Jewish way of life against all foreign influences. They were strict legalists, they believed in the Old Testament, and they were nationalists in politics. They wanted to bring in the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven (or the Kingdom of God) upon the earth.

Sadducees—the Sadducees were made up of the wealthy and socially–minded. They had no spiritual depth. They wanted to get rid of tradition. They rejected the supernatural and were opposed to the Pharisees who accepted the supernatural and accepted the Old Testament. They were closely akin to the Greek Epicureans.

Herodians—the Herodians were a party in the days of Jesus who arose as political opportunists. They were strictly a party to try to keep the Herods on the throne.

This background will help us understand the incident before us. - McGee

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Mar 7:1 And the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem.

You will notice that our Lord has made such an impression that these men are drawn out of Jerusalem, and they have come to the place where He is ministering in Galilee. Also, they will come across the Jordan River into the area of the Decapolis, that is, the area of ten cities. We'll see that in a moment. - McGee

Mar 7:2-4 And when they saw some of His disciples eating loaves with unclean hands, that is with unwashed hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they immerse their hands with the fist, holding the tradition of the elders. And coming from the market, they do not eat without immersing, and there are many other things which they have received to hold, the dippings of cups and pots, and of copper vessels, and of tables.

Let us stop to look at this for just a moment because it is quite interesting. There is a crisis arising about the person of Jesus. Back in Mar_6:30 we read that the apostles had gathered themselves around Jesus and had told Him all the things that they had done after He had sent them out. They had come back and reported to Him. Now also the scribes and the Pharisees are coming out and gathering about Him. There is bound to be a confrontation here between the Lord Jesus

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and His followers and the Pharisees and their followers. One group is made up of His friends, His followers, who love Him. The second group is comprised of His enemies, who seek to destroy Him.

It has always been this way. There are two groups: those who trust Him and those who reject Him. To be personal, which group are you in? That makes all the difference in the world. The question is not whether you are a member of a church or have been through some ceremony; rather it is what is your relationship to Jesus Christ? That is all-important question.

Now this obviously was a special delegation from Jerusalem. They had been sent to Galilee to spy on Jesus. They were the intellectual opponents sent to trap the Lord Jesus. The way that our Lord defended Himself is to me another proof of His deity—"... Never man spake like this man" was the testimony of His enemies (Joh_7:46). Of course, it wasn't difficult for them to find some fault because the Lord Jesus entirely ignored their traditions.

Now what was their tradition? They were not simply criticizing the disciples because of a breach of etiquette, but for the fact that the Lord was not having them keep the traditions, which were their interpretations of the Old Testament. Mark explains for the benefit of the Romans that this custom of ceremonial cleansing was peculiar to Israel; and it was.

God had given to Israel a great deal of information about cleansing. In the Old Testament, in the Book of Leviticus, there is a great deal of instruction about cleansing. It was very important because God was teaching them the great lesson that a sinner had to be cleansed before he could enjoy fellowship with a holy God. But the Pharisees had built a great tradition that was supposed to be an interpretation of the Mosaic Law, and some of them even contended that Moses had given them the traditions when he gave them the Law. In time, these traditions became the interpretation of the Law, and eventually there was a wide departure in the traditions from what had been the intent of the Law.

In our passage here, some of this tradition is given in detail. They would ceremonially wash the cups and pots and brasen vessels and the tables. All of this was a burdensome sort of thing and was an entirely outward performance. The word used for "washing" is baptism. They baptized cups, pots, religious objects, even tables. Now this is a religion with a vengeance, friend, and you can see that one could get so involved in going through a ritual of religion that one would forget the whole purpose—which is that a person must be made right with God before a relationship can be established. We find the same kind of thing today. So many people will argue points of religion when it is the person of Jesus Christ that should be our concern. Now let's go on: - McGee

Can you see the irony?

They would go through a process of spiritual cleansing of the dishes and their hands all the way to their elbows. Their hands were clean, their dishes were baptized, but their hearts were defiled!

Mar 7:5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat loaves with unwashed hands?

This accusation which they lodge against His disciples was, of course, really an accusation against Him personally, because these were His followers. Now notice how our Lord deals with them—and it isn't tenderly at all! - McGee

Mar 7:6-7 But He answered and said to them, Well has Isaiah prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. However, they worship Me in vain, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."

I wouldn't say that is gentle. A hypocrite is one who is just acting a part; it is a word used for actors on the stage. They were going through a religious ritual without experiencing any reality at all. The lips and the heart might as well have belonged to two separate persons. They had no more heart experience than a wooden dummy upon the knee of a ventriloquist.

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My friend, there are a lot of people who are just going through a ritual in church today. The heart must be involved if it is genuine. "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom_10:9-10). Oh, people get involved today in creeds and church confessions and public worship, dress and even "separation." All of this can become a matter of tradition and not a direct and personal dealing with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Worship is empty when the rules of men are substituted for the Word of God. So now we come to the very heart of the matter. - McGee

Mar 7:8-9 For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men, the dippings of pots and cups. And many other such things you do. And He said to them, Do you do well to set aside the commandment of God, so that you may keep your own tradition?

Here was the whole issue. They were substituting traditions of men for the Word of God. A tradition may actually be good and may be established for a very good reason. However, it becomes evil when it is a substitute for the Word of God in later generations. And that is what has happened to these people here.

I think this is the reason that so many denominations today have departed from the Word of God. They first substituted a creed for the Word of God. Then they began to substitute the word of men and the thinking of men and their own little ritual and their own little denomination. Before long, the Word of God went out the window. This has happened again and again. – McGee

What do you think God sees when He looks down and sees one of the churches or "lampstands" teaching contrary to His word?

Mar 7:10-11 For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother." And "Whoever curses father or mother, let him die the death." But you say, if a man shall say to his father or mother, Corban! (that is, A gift to God, whatever you may profit by me)

Now, He is giving them an example of what they were doing. Moses had said in the Law that they were to honor their father and their mother. But their tradition permitted them to escape the responsibility to their parents. If a man did not want to help his father and mother when they became old and needy, he would dedicate his possessions to the priest in the temple and it was called Corban which means "a gift." At the man's death, his estate went to the temple, and he was relieved of his responsibility to his parents. - McGee

Mar 7:12-13 and you no longer allow him to do anything toward his father or mother, making the Word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have delivered. And you do many such things.

He's saying that this tradition was pernicious, and it directly contradicted the intent of the Law of God, which was to honor one's father and mother.

There is a great danger today that people will give to any group or organization that has appealed to them. There are literally thousands of Christian organizations that have men out in the field, combing the highways and byways to find people to give to their organization. There is a grave danger in that. There are certain personal responsibilities that people must fulfill. - McGee

Do you think one or more of these Pharisees actually used the Corban exception to not take care of his parents?

How about you? Where are you regularly violating one of the Commandments? If you cannot find peace, if you seem distant from God, is there one or two of these commandments that have become accepted in your life? If you can sin

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and no longer hear the Holy Spirit's voice, you are definitely in a scary place. No one can fulfill the commandments but we as Christians should not be able to sin successfully!

What Defiles a Person

Mar 7:14-15 *And calling near all the crowd, He said to them, Listen to Me, every one of you, and understand. There is nothing from outside a man which entering into him can defile him. But the things which come out of him, those are the ones that defile the man.*

He is differentiating which is external and that which is internal and is pointing out what is real. He shows here that religion is not something that you can rub on as you do a salve. It is not something that you eat or refrain from eating.

You'll notice then that He went into the house and his disciples came to Him and asked Him about the parable. – McGee

Jesus is essentially saying that unlike what most people see in Church. It has nothing to do with the externals, what you wear, how you sing, if you teach, if you serve, but it was 100% internal. It is about the relationship with Christ, your motivations and your heart. All the rest is pretty much like putting lipstick on a pig!



Tradition conceals truth

Each generation encumbered the divinely ordained ritual with its own comments; so after a while men's notions overgrew and hid from sight God's thought, as some wild vine in the forest wreathes its fetters of verdure around the hearty tree, interlacing and interknitting its sprays, looping mesh on mesh of pliant growth, till the tree is smothered and hidden, and the all-encompassing vine alone is seen and seems to bare life. (Monday Club Sermons.) – Biblical Illustrator

Where have we accepted tradition that is not biblical and concealed God's truth?

Mar 7:16-19 *If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. And when He had entered into the house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. And He said to them, Are you also without understanding? Do you not perceive that whatever enters into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter into his heart, but into the belly, and goes out into the waste-bowl, purifying all food?*

Even the disciples were mystified by this. Brought up under the teachings of the OT, they had always considered that certain foods like pork, rabbit, and shrimp were unclean and would defile them. Jesus now plainly stated that man was not defiled by what went into him. In a sense, this signaled the end of legal dispensation. – Believers Bible Commentary

So, was he doing away with the commandment for both the Jew and Gentile, or simply making the point of defiling from sin versus food?

Later in Acts, the church will have to deal with Circumcision and interestingly the only dietary restrictions mentioned for the Gentiles is meat sacrificed to idols, strangled, and eating the blood.

Act 15:19-20 *Therefore my judgment is that we do not trouble those who have turned to God from among the nations, but that we write to them that they should abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.*

Mar 7:20-23 *And He said, That which comes out of the man is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit,*

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lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things pass out from inside and defile the man.

It's what comes out of one's heart that defiles a person: evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. In the context, the thought is that human tradition should be listed here too. The tradition of Corban was tantamount to murder. Parents could die of starvation before this wicked vow could be broken.

One of the great lessons in this passage is that we must constantly test all teaching and all tradition by the Word of God, obeying what is of God and rejecting what is of men. At first a man may teach and preach a clear, scriptural message, gaining acceptance among Bible-believing people. Having gained this acceptance, he begins to add some human teaching. His devoted followers who have come to feel that he can do no wrong follow him blindly, even if his message blunts the sharp edge of the Word or waters down its clear meaning.

It was thus that the scribes and Pharisees had gained authority as teachers of the Word. But they were now nullifying the intent of the Word. The Lord Jesus had to warn the people that it is the Word that accredits men, not men who accredit the Word. The great touchstone must always be, "What does the Word say?" – Believers Bible Commentary

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

Mar 7:24-25 And He arose from there and went into the borders of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered into a house and desired no one to know it. But He could not be hidden. For a woman, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of Him and came and fell at His feet.

In the preceding incident Jesus showed that all foods are clean. Here He demonstrates that Gentiles are no longer common or unclean. Jesus now traveled northwest to the region of Tyre and Sidon, also known as Syro-Phoenecia. He tried to enter a house incognito, but His fame had preceded Him and His presence was soon known. A Gentile woman came to Him, asking for help for her demon-possessed daughter. – Believers Bible Commentary

Mar 7:26 The woman was a Greek, a Syro-phenician by race. And she begged Him that He would cast the demon out of her daughter.

We emphasize the fact that she was a Greek, not a Jew. The Jews, God's chosen people, occupied a place of distinct privilege with God. He had made wonderful covenants with them, committed the Scriptures to them, and dwelt with them in the tabernacle, and later in the temple. By contrast, the Gentiles were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise, without Christ, without hope, without God in the world (Eph_2:11-12). The Lord Jesus came primarily to the nation of Israel. He presented Himself as King to that nation. The gospel was first preached to the house of Israel. It is important to see this in order to understand His dealings with the Syro-Phoenician woman. When she asked Him to cast the demon out of her daughter, He seemed to rebuff her. – Believers Bible Commentary

Mar 7:27-28 But Jesus said to her, Let the children first be filled. For it is not right to take the children's loaves and to throw it to the dogs. And she answered and said to Him, Yes, Lord, yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs.

Jesus said that the children (Israelites) should be filled first, and that it was not proper to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs (Gentiles). His answer was not a refusal. He said, "Let the children be filled first." This might sound harsh. Actually, it was a test of her repentance and faith. His ministry at that time was directed primarily to the Jews. As a Gentile, she had no claim on Him or His benefits. Would she acknowledge this truth?

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She did, saying in effect, “Yes, Lord. I am only a little Gentile dog. But I notice that puppies have a way of eating crumbs that children drop under the table. That’s all I ask for—some crumbs left over from your ministry to the Jews! – Believers Bible Commentary

God clearly chose the Hebrew people to send His savior, but now that Jesus has come and the veil is torn, and grave is defeated, do you believe that only the Hebrews are the chosen people?

Mar 7:29-30 And He said to her, For this saying go, the demon has gone out of your daughter. And when she had come to her house, she found the demon had gone out, and her daughter lay on the couch.

This faith was remarkable. The Lord rewarded it instantly by healing the girl at a distance. When the woman went home, her daughter was fully recovered. - Believers Bible Commentary

Jesus Heals a Deaf Man

Mar 7:31-32 And again, departing from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, He came to the Sea of Galilee, in the midst of the borders of the Decapolis. And they brought a deaf one to Him, hardly speaking. And they begged Him to put His hand on him.

From the Mediterranean coast, our Lord returned to the east coast of the Sea of Galilee—the area known as Decapolis. There an incident took place that is recorded only in Mark's Gospel. Interested friends brought to Him one who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech. Maybe this impediment was caused by a physical deformity or by the fact that, never hearing sounds clearly, he could not reproduce them correctly. At any rate, he pictures the sinner, deaf to the voice of God and therefore unable to speak to others about Him. – Believers Bible Commentary

Notice: the miracle was only possible because his friends care enough to bring him to Jesus. Who are you bringing to Jesus?

Mar 7:33-34 And He took him aside from the crowd and put His fingers into his ears. And He spat and touched his tongue. And looking up to Heaven, He sighed and said to him, Ephphatha! (that is, Be opened!)

Jesus first took the man aside privately. He put His fingers in his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue, thus by a sort of sign language telling the man that He was about to open his ears and unloose his tongue. Next Jesus looked up to heaven, indicating that His power was from God. His sigh expressed His grief over the suffering which sin has brought on mankind. Finally, He said “Ephphatha,” the Aramaic word for “Be opened.”- Believers Bible Commentary

Jesus is interested in you personally not the crowds. He takes time and pulls him aside. Scripture says today He stands at the door and knocks. Are you taking the time to get alone with the King of Kings?

Mar 7:35-37 And instantly his ears were opened, and the bond of his tongue was loosened, and he spoke plainly. And He commanded them that they should tell no one. But the more He commanded them, so much the more they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.

The man obtained normal hearing and speech immediately. The Lord asked the people not to publicize the miracle, but they disregarded His instructions. Disobedience can never be justified, no matter how well-meaning the persons might be.

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The spectators were astonished by His wonderful works. They said, “He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” They did not know the truth of what they said. Had they lived on this side of Calvary, they would have said it with even deeper conviction and feeling.

And since our souls have learned His love,

What mercies has He made us prove,

Mercies which all our praise excel;

Our Jesus hath done all things well.

—Samuel Medley

Notice, the order of the miracle. The Lord unstops his ears to hear the Word of God, and then Loosens his tongue to speak to proclaim His praise. His physical condition is a metaphor of our condition without Jesus.