

Mark 7:1-23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 7 verses 1 to 23. And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, And he said to them, Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. And he said to them, You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition.

For Moses said, Honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die. But you say, If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is korban, that is given to God, then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down, and many such things you do.

And he called the people to him again and said to them, Hear me, all of you, and understand, there is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him.

But the things that come out of a person are what defile him. And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, Then are you also without understanding?

[1 : 5 3] Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart, but his stomach, and is expelled? Thus he declared all foods clean.

And he said, What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. In Mark chapter 7, the Pharisees once again challenge Jesus on account of his disciples' behaviour.

In chapter 2, it was on account of their supposed breaking of the Sabbath as they walked through the grain fields. Here it is due to their failure to ritually cleanse before eating. It's an objection story. It begins with the objections of the Pharisees and some of the scribes from Jerusalem. It's followed by an address to the people. And then it's concluded with a private discussion with the disciples. When the Pharisees and the scribes challenge Jesus concerning his disciples' failure to ritually wash their hands, Jesus responds by referencing Isaiah chapter 29 verse 13.

[3 : 0 5] He argues that they undermine the commandment of God through their tradition. They seek to reject the commandment in order to establish their tradition. The two are presented as antithetically related.

Jesus underlines the importance of the commandment to honour parents by adding to his reference of the fifth commandment, the citation of Exodus chapter 21 verse 17.

The use of the Corban vow to defraud one's neighbour, in this case parents, from what is due to them, is putting the love of God at odds with love to neighbour, which should be its necessary corollary.

They're engaging in a sort of casuistry designed to circumvent the intent of the law, rather than to establish it. We've already seen this with the Sabbath. Their very particular observance, in all these little details, actually offers them means to avoid obedience, to avoid what the Lord wants from them.

The verse that Jesus quotes in Isaiah chapter 29 verse 13 is important because of its context also. In verses 9 to 14 of that chapter we read, And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed.

[4 : 33] When men give it to one who can read, saying, Read this, he says, I cannot, for it is sealed. And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, Read this, he says, I cannot read.

And the Lord said, Because this people draw near with their mouth, and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.

The applicability of the judgment here to Jesus' ministry and the responses to it should be immediately apparent. Jesus doesn't directly answer the Pharisees' question.

Rather, he levels a counter-accusation. He fundamentally challenges the grounds on which they are making the accusation. They are falsely claiming authority as arbiters of proper adherence to God's law, while violating it themselves.

Perhaps hand-washing was for them originally a super-erogatory matter of special cleanness that could be voluntarily adopted, but which, through the development of the tradition, gradually became an absolute standard and a way in which to judge others.

[5 : 46] Tradition is to be judged by scripture, and hypocrisy is a constant problem. They draw near to God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him. And Jesus, throughout his teaching, focuses upon purity of the heart.

That's what matters. The point is not primarily here arguing against food laws, but against the Pharisaic misuse of the tradition. Even the law itself highlighted that it was what came out that was the problem.

Jesus goes on to teach the people that what comes out of the mouth is what really matters. The importance of the tongue is that it manifests the heart. We should beware of seeing this simply as a light dismissal of the food laws, rather than as a disclosure of their true rationale.

Jesus is fond of highlighting the radical antitheses that one encounters in the prophets, for instance, that pit the external practice over against its inner rationale and purpose. So, for instance, mercy against sacrifice.

I desire mercy, not sacrifice. The point is not that sacrifice shouldn't be made, or that it should be negated. The tradition isn't being rejected wholesale. The point is that sacrifice needs to be understood in terms of mercy.

[6 : 57] In verse 19 here, though, there's something a bit more radical. Thus he declared all foods clean. It's an extremely important statement. Is Jesus merely saying that all foods have always already been clean?

Or is he overturning the system of food laws? I think there's a bit of both. Jesus' argument about digestion is a timeless one. It's not dependent upon some new event in history.

This has always been the case, that people take the food into themselves, and it doesn't actually pollute their heart. It's a matter of just going through the digestive system. Yet the statement itself implies that Jesus actually made a performative utterance, something that changed the status of foods by his statement.

In Acts chapter 10 verses 10 to 16, I think we see more about this. And he became hungry and wanted something to eat. But while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth.

In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But Peter said, By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.

[8 : 10] And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common. This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. You can see the same thing in Romans chapter 14 verse 20.

Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. What I believe that Jesus is doing here is laying the foundation for the later abrogation of the food laws.

What he is showing is that the food laws did not depend upon the inherent cleanness or uncleanness of the foods in themselves. Rather, clean and unclean foods were to be observed as signs of the separateness of Israel from the nations and of their special relationship with God.

They were symbols. They weren't the reality of cleanness or uncleanness. That lay in the heart. Once the Gentiles were included, the food laws could be left behind, because their rationale was never the defiling power of foods in themselves, but rather their symbolic import.

A question to consider. Jesus emphasises the absolute importance of the handed down tradition to the Pharisees, and the way that they are attached to it over God's commandment.

[9 : 20] As tradition ostensibly functions to guard the authority of the commandment, what are some of the ways that we can guard against our traditions being valued in themselves, merely for their own sakes, in ways that set them at odds with the commandment and the word of God?