

October 18, 2009/ Mark 7 (ESV¹)

Mark 7:1 Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem,

²they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

this is a fact-finding commission from Jerusalem, here to find fault with Jesus ... they do it, not through direct attack on Him, but by attacking the disciples ... the chain of logic is that if the disciples are ignorant of the rules of proper religious behavior, then what kind of a Rabbi could their Master possibly be? ...

³(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders,

the "tradition of the elders" refers to the oral, rabbinical elaboration on the OT Law produced in the 5th and 4th centuries BC (long after the OT had been given) ... the scribes wanted exact definitions and boundaries ... for one thing, they had decided that before eating, all serious Jews should do a ceremonial washing, in order to make sure that they weren't accidentally going to eat with hands that had touched someone or something, who had touched someone or something, who had touched someone or something, etc. that was ceremonially unclean ... this elaboration on the written OT Law amounted to creation of a rule-keeping system through which the orthodox were expecting to approve themselves to God ...

⁴and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)

⁵And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

Jesus proceeds to indict them for their lack of understanding of and interest in what God truly requires of man ... they have elevated their elaborations on the Scripture to a point where those have become important and the Scripture has been left behind ...

⁶And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written," 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;

hypocrites ... "those acting the part" ... these people display an outward concern with the honor of God ... but the inward attitude is in contradiction to that outward display ... meticulous going-through-the-motions doesn't substitute for real humility of heart ...

⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

¹ Scripture taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright 2000; 2001, by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

besides, while the Pharisees claimed to be upholding the OT, what they were really doing was upholding a system of false religion that was exactly the kind of thing that God had condemned through the prophet Isaiah ...

8You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

Jesus immediately gives an example of how keeping the rabbinic tradition in fact contradicted the OT Law ...

9And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"

10For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'

11But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God)—

12then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother,

13thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

it is the fifth commandment that Jesus is pointing to here ... you don't get any more basic in terms of laying out God's moral intentions for man than the 10 commandments ... the game the Pharisees were allowing was for a person to take an oath dedicating his property "to God," which apparently allowed him to continue to use it, but prevented him from giving it to pay for the care of his parents ... the Pharisees were allowing their rules in this way to contradict the clear intention of the 5th commandment ... this is a "religion" of rules and manipulation of those rules according to one's own desires ... it is a far cry from a true love of God and His commands and a humble dependence upon Him ...

14And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand:

so the Pharisees are in the wrong ... but does the charge against the disciples stand? ... they have indeed been eating with unwashed hands ... that's a violation of the oral tradition ... does that put them morally in the wrong? ... this is important, and Jesus speaks not just to the Pharisees, but to the whole crowd ... hear me, all of you, and understand ...

15There 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."

now this runs contrary to the rabbinic teaching ... it runs counter to all of fallen man's thinking ... we want to make contamination/defilement a matter from the outside ... only Biblical theology tells us that people are sinners from birth and by nature ... it isn't external contamination that does us in, it's who we are when we are born by virtue of the fall that does us in ...

17And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable.

18And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him,

19since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

20And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him.

21For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,

22coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

23All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

it is not the accidental touching of something or someone who has touched something or someone who has touched something or someone ritually unclean that renders us unacceptable to God ... the matter is far more serious than that ... it is the habits of our fallen hearts that undo us ...

this is quite an awful line-up of evils Jesus mentions ... Ryle: "... we see from this passage what a black catalog of evils the human heart contains. 'Out of men's hearts,' says our Lord, 'come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside.' (verses 21-23). Let us clearly understand when we read these words that our Lord is speaking of the human heart generally. He is not speaking only of the notorious profligate or the prisoner in jail. He is speaking of all mankind. All of us, whether high or low, rich or poor, masters or servants, old or young, learned or unlearned, all of us have by nature such a heart as Jesus here describes. The seeds of all the evils here mentioned lie within us all. They may lie dormant all our lives. They may be kept down by the fear of consequences, the restraint of public opinion, the dread of discovery, the desire to be thought respectable and, above all, by the almighty grace of God. But everyone has the root of every sin inside. How humble we ought to be, when we read these verses! **'All of us have become like one who is unclean' (Isaiah 64:6)** in God's sight. He sees in each one of us countless evils which the world never sees at all, for he reads our hearts. Surely of all sins to which we are liable, self-righteousness is the most unreasonable and unbecoming. How thankful we ought to be for the Gospel when we read these verses! That Gospel contains a complete provision for all the needs of our poor defiled natures. The blood of Christ can 'cleanse us from all sin.' The Holy Spirit can change even our sinful hearts, and keep them clean when they are changed. The person who does not glory in the Gospel can surely know little of the plague that is within. How watchful we ought to be when we remember these verses! What a careful guard we ought to keep over our imagination, our tongues and our daily behavior! At the head of the black list of our heart's contents stand 'evil thoughts.' Let us never forget that. Thoughts are the parents of words and deeds. Let us pray daily for grace to keep our thoughts in order, and let us cry earnestly and fervently, 'lead us not into temptation.'"

Jesus now takes His disciples on an excursion (that many scholars believe lasted as long as six months) into gentile territory ... it seems as if Jesus is looking for an opportunity to teach them privately, away from the demands of the Jewish crowds and their expectations of what He might be

as Messiah ... we should note that to the Jewish mind of the day, this was not particularly lightly done ... talk about setting oneself up to get ritually defiled!!! ... in gentile territory, there would be no way to avoid touching these people and their stuff ... hardly the way for a good Jewish Rabbi to be leading His little flock ... unless there is something fundamentally different about this Rabbi, and the era His death and resurrection are going to usher in ... we need to bear this in mind as we hear these next few verses ... the kind of incident we see here is essentially guaranteed by the fact that Jesus has left Jewish territory ... Jesus is not caught off guard by it ... and His behavior in the incident is meant to begin to teach His disciples the lesson that comes totally clear in Acts 10 at the house of Cornelius: the Kingdom is in fact open to all whose hearts are right before God ...

Mark 7:24 And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden.

Tyre ... this is the Lebanese coast ... it's gentile country, one of the more notorious pagan regions surrounding Israel ... notice that even though He is out of the country, Jesus cannot travel or hole up in a private house without drawing attention ...

25 But immediately a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet.

26 Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

here comes a woman of the region (out of love for her daughter and sheer desperation) approaching this itinerant Jewish Rabbi and His flock ... she has somehow heard that He has supernatural ability and comes begging for help ... the appeal is for simple mercy ... there is no hint here that she feels she is owed anything ... she comes, not on the basis of any merit of her own, but in hope that Jesus will, because of who He is, choose to be merciful ... there is a tremendous difference evident already between the attitude of this pagan gentile woman and the "religious" Pharisees ... there is no hesitation about her whatsoever ... she doesn't waste a second ... she makes a bee line to Jesus ... this verse in Mark shows her kneeling at the feet of Jesus ... Matt records her calling Jesus "Lord, Son of David" ...

Mark says "Greek" or gentile, Matt says Canaanite ... she was part of the race that the children of Israel were supposed to have driven out of this territory ... as far as the promises and covenants of God were concerned, this person was a complete outsider ... it is not even like the story of the woman at the well ... that person was at least a Samaritan, a Jewish half-breed with some idea of the Jewish religion ... this person had no claim to favor with the Jewish God at all ...

she begged Jesus to drive the demon out ... Matt is even more graphic about her imploring ... before she ever hears a word from Jesus, this woman is persistent ... she has no promises from God, no legal basis on which to approach Jesus, and yet in her humility, she is persistent ...

27 And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

this seems to us to be hard, to be uncaring ... some liberal commentators have gone so far as to (in their own infinite wisdom) maintain that Jesus could never have said this and that it must be an addition of some scribe in a time where the church was under attack from the Jews ... that's garbage ... what Jesus says is the truth ... His earthly ministry was directed at the Jews ... the fact is that

God's wonderful plan of redemption was worked through the Jews ... that plan eventually is seen to encompass all peoples, but it came through the Jews, they were the ones prepared for it, and that's where Jesus was spending His energy ...

let the children be fed first ... certainly this is the Jewish people as a whole ... perhaps specifically the disciples, especially if Jesus is saying that he has come here to Tyre specifically to teach the disciples ... the Gospel was indeed first to the Jews ... that's a fact ... that's not a statement about God being capricious or arbitrary ... it is a statement of God's plan for saving all men ... the first stage is the offering of the Gospel to the Jews ...

the Jews called gentiles "dogs" ... the word they used was one for a cur ... a wild street dog ... the word that Jesus uses here is not that one ... it is instead a diminutive ... but scholars caution to not get sentimental and think this form really lessened the severity of the comment ... He is probably quoting a common proverb that reflected the standard Jewish attitude of the time regarding how appropriate it would be for Him to grant her request ... Jesus doesn't endorse the attitude or say it is right ... but His (true) reply serves to bring out in this woman what Jesus wants to see and what He wants the disciples to see ... He is drawing out what her heart is towards Him ... this would be a good time to go stomping off insulted, if that's what one wanted to do ... but the woman does not ... instead, she humbly persists ...

thinking about this picture of children sitting at the table and Jesus not being willing to take the meal and through it on the floor, think also about the any irony in the picture ... the kids themselves are going to reject it and throw it on the floor! ... this woman becomes a symbol for all of us gentiles who will eagerly accept the Bread of Life that the children of Israel chose to discard on the floor ...

"First let the children eat all they want" does not slam the door on her or the rest of us gentiles ... it just means the Jews have prior claim ...

28 But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

she says that she has no quibble with the plan of God ... she's not asking for the Jew's portion and freely admits she is coming without the proper endorsements ... but she recognizes that the richness of God's grace is such that there is plenty for the kids, with more than enough left over for the family dog ... she doesn't claim that she's owed anything ... she simply depends/relies upon the mercy of Jesus ... in true faith, she has cast herself upon Him, and is relying on, and cleaving to Him ... in God's great grace, there is more than enough for the children and the goodness spills over to all peoples ... that was the way it was to be from the beginning ... **Genesis 22:18 "... and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."**

I wish that we knew the inflections in these speeches ... it is impossible to know how this was said ... was it said in a pleading tone? ... in a sparring/jesting kind of way? ... we can't tell ... one thing that is clear from the word choice in any case, is that the woman wasn't going to debate the gentile place with Jesus ... she understood and was willing to accept that the Jews had first right to the attention of Jesus ... she was grateful for any leftover grace that might come the way of those outside the covenant ... we'd say it's not fair, we're all equal, we have just as much right ... all of which simply reveals our arrogance before God ... no human deserves anything on his or her own merit ...

29And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter."

it is this kind of desperate, persistent, humble reliance upon Christ that God desires in us ... it's not the crass kind of game playing with homemade rule systems that the Pharisees were engaged in that pleases God ... instead it's the stuff exhibited by this woman ... and in a foreshadowing to the disciples that the kingdom will be open to Jew and gentile alike with this kind of faith, Jesus dispenses mercy on her and her daughter ...

this woman has exhibited persistence and humility ... she has maintained that Jesus is the source of her only hope ... without thinking that anything is deserved, she has correctly held onto the belief that Jesus will come to her aid ... in the end God will reward that kind of faith ...

30And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

31Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

the Decapolis ... remember that the former demoniac had faithfully spread the good news in this area of what Jesus had done for Him ... Jesus goes north and then loops around east and then south in Syria ... some people think that there are a number of months covered here in this one verse ... a time that Jesus is nurturing the disciples ... anyway He makes his way back to the region where He earlier delivered the Gadarene demoniac ...

32And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

they brought him ... as in the case of the paralytic in Mark 2, faithful friends have a part here ... they bring this man to Jesus ... this is another one of these times that it is a friend or relative that comes bringing the need to Jesus ... who knows whether this guy would have come on his own ... who knows whether he even knew about Jesus being in the region ... but somebody else who was concerned about him and believed that Jesus would help him brought him ...

33And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue.

in this instance, Jesus took the guy aside ... He didn't always do this, but for whatever reason this was done somehow in private ... some believe that it is a matter of not wanting to embarrass the man ... Matt reports great crowds ... one thing that the variety of ways in which Jesus ministered to people ought to say to us is that there is no "formula" here ... Jesus is treating each person and situation individually ... He may have been concerned that if some of the people in the crowd saw Him spitting and touching the guy's tongue that there would spring up a new spitting ministry ...

it may be that what Jesus is doing here amounts to a kind of sign language with this deaf man ... Jesus is touching those things that He intends to heal ... then He looks up to heaven to indicate that what's going to happen is to God's credit ...

34And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."

the deep sigh? ... I think that Jesus is expressing his empathy with our human suffering, His compassion for the man ...

35And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Jesus has not only changed whatever physical problems needed fixing, He has also apparently instantaneously accomplished whatever rewiring of the brain was needed ...

this is Messiah ... the sign is plain, just as Isaiah promised ... **Isaiah 35:5-6** Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 'then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

C.E. Graham Swift: "Dumbness usually results from deafness. If our ears are open to listen to the Word of the Lord, then our tongues will surely be unloosened in praise, prayer and testimony. Furthermore, only as the church hears the Word of God has it anything worthwhile to say."

36And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

why were they not to spread the word? ... lots of people have ideas ... for one thing, this is roughly the area where Jesus healed the Gadarene demoniac ... Jesus had instructed that fellow to go home and tell all God had done for Him ... the people, however, asked Him to leave and quit making trouble ...

37And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

this "He has done everything well" ought to remind us of God's own pronouncement at creation that it was good, He had done it well ... here Jesus is in the process of bringing the new creation ... and it is very good ...

Genesis 1:31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. ... not only is everything that God made good, but so too is every manifestation of the power of His Son ... the crowd was astonished, but it didn't lead to faith, to humble dependence upon Jesus ...