

Mark – The First Gospel

016 – Bad Traditions – Mark 7:1-23

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/> .

First Thoughts

Mark chapter 7 is at the center of the unit that goes from chapter 6 to 8. Chapter 6 opened with Jesus' rejection in Nazareth and his sending out of the apostles. This story was interrupted by the account of John the Baptist's execution which asked the question, *Who is Jesus?* Upon their return the feeding of the five-thousand (in Jewish territory) occurs. Chapter 8 closes the unit with the feeding of the four-thousand (in Gentile territory) and Jesus asking his disciples, *Who am I?*

Chapter 7 in the center discusses traditions surrounding Jewish ritual purity and a story about Gentile woman. This entire unit serves to reveal what purity (or holiness) means and who is included in God's kingdom.

We must be careful when reading today's passage. It has sometimes been used to justify anti-Semitism, or at the very least denigrate Judaism. It has been used by "low-church" Christians to unfairly attack Christians who value and practice much more ritualized forms of Christianity. It has been used by one Christian group to criticize other groups who don't belong for beliefs and practices that the first don't believe or practice.

Here are some questions then that we ought to keep in mind as we study this text:

- Are all "traditions" bad? And what does Jesus/Mark mean by the term?
- What is Jesus/Mark attempting to communicate about purity and holiness?
- What did Jesus/Mark mean when he writes, "Thus he declared all foods clean" (v.19b)?

Accusation

^{7:1} Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and 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.) ⁵ And 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?" ⁶ And 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;*

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

Discussion

1. What is the setting? Who is present?
2. What is the controversy? Is this the real problem, or is there more to it?
3. Jesus responds with a quotation from Isaiah. What is the point Jesus is making?

Rebuttal One: Bad Tradition

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

⁹ *And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'¹¹ But 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)— ¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."*

Discussion

4. Jesus' first rebuttal is that his opponents are placing man-made traditions over the commandment (*singular!*) of God. What is Jesus saying? What is the commandment?
5. Jesus uses an example involving the fifth commandment of the Decalogue, the one about honoring parents. Scholars believe this example is more hypothetical than it was real, but the point being made about negating one command using another is real. Jesus refers to "many such things you do." What is the problem Jesus is exposing?
6. This rebuttal seems somewhat off-topic. The original accusation was about ritual purity. How is this rebuttal germane to the original topic?

Rebuttal Two: Genuine Defilement

¹⁴ *And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ 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."¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And 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, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."*

Discussion

7. Jesus returns to the original topic of ritual purity and responds with a *parable*. What causes defilement in the Law? What causes defilement according to Jesus?

8. What is Mark saying through his parenthetical statement “Thus he declared all foods clean”?
9. According to Jesus, who is defiled and who is clean?

Summary

- i. Are all traditions bad? Discuss.
- ii. What constitutes purity/holiness and defilement? Discuss.
- iii. Is God holy? Was Jesus holy? How does holiness manifest? Discuss.
- iv. Do Christians have rituals? How about ritual washings? Discuss.
- v. What is the significance of this story in terms of Christians relating to the rest of the world?

Though baptism has long been associated with cleansing and forgiveness of sin, it has for just as long been associated with the deeply unclean death of Jesus. When we are baptized, we are joined to Jesus’ death as well as his resurrection (Rom. 6:3–5). Thus, baptism does not remove us from the stains of the world, but joins us to blood, dirt, and anguish, and to all those whom the world regards as unclean.¹

¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7140.