

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23^{vii} ^{viii}

When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

^{vii} **About Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

The selection from the sayings on defilement (7:1-23) that constitutes today's gospel raises the question of the relationship between "the commandment of God" and "the tradition of the elders" and of the real meaning of cleanness and defilement, issues of vital interest to the early Church. All three sections concern ritual purity: the first centering on washing (7:1-8), the second and third on food (7:14-15, 21-23).

Various regulations had been established in the Mosaic code to ensure the ceremonial cleanness of priest and people, for defilement rendered one unfit to participate in the

community worship. The “tradition of the elders” was the body of interpretive comment on the law of Moses accumulated as people tried to apply the law to new situations. It was passed down in oral form and only first written down about A.D. 200.

The issue of eating foods held unclean by the Mosaic law actually involved a point of the written law, not the oral tradition. Not observing dietary restrictions meant invalidating sections of the Old Testament scriptures. This matter was hotly contested in the early years of the Church, especially in the Gentile churches for which Mark wrote (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8). Mark takes pains to insert an explanation of Jewish practice for them and to make clear the implication of Jesus’ saying (7:19b).

The final verses (7:17-23) may all have been shaped by the controversy in the early Church—it is difficult to account for the disputes at Jerusalem (Acts 15:5-21) and Antioch (Galatians 2:11-16) if Jesus’ words were so unambiguous. In general Jesus seems to have set aside the demands of the law (e.g., Sabbath observance) in response to particular situations of human need. Freedom for the Church from the dietary code opened the way for the mission to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

^{viii} **Reflection and Response**

Incorporated in the Deuteronomy passage is the incalculable mystery of Israel’s election and mission. Moses appeals to the unique revelation of God to Israel and pleads for whole-hearted obedience to God. The law is to be a fence around the people of God so that they may live obedient to the One God, preserved from idolatrous influences in the years to come. The nation’s fidelity to God’s law was meant to demonstrate to all humanity the divine rule in human history. Here in substance is the missionary purpose of Israel’s existence.

Judaism considers the messianic claim of Jesus an addition that radically departs from the basic principle of the Jewish faith—the unity of God. The reference to a “god so near” is interpreted by the rabbis to mean that no intermediary of any sort is required for the worshiper to approach God in prayer. Judaism has a wide tradition of religious tolerance. It teaches that all people are judged solely on their moral life and the righteous of all nations share in the world to come with the righteous of Israel.

Judaism always taught that right motives are all-important, and Jesus certainly emphasized this in his teaching and preaching. In Mark 7, he points out that evil comes from within, “out of the heart.” Although righteousness cannot be legislated, the innumerable additions to the Torah via the oral tradition were justified by Israel’s teachers as necessary for deeper

understanding and for increased resistance to idolatry-the offense that leads to all other sin.

Sin continues to take its toll. Human pride and perversity remain unconquered without divine intervention-the new and marvelous things that God did by sending the Son into the world. We know that the rulers of darkness and the spiritual hosts of wickedness assail us. The sword of the Spirit is still the Word of God. But the word came new and powerful in Christ to cleanse our hearts of evil from within. Christ completes the “whole armor of God.”