

DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?

SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED

By Steve Zeisler

In this series we are going through the gospel of Mark (see Discovery Papers #4569-#4575), considering questions Jesus asked. Mark's record of Jesus' life is the best choice for such an enterprise. Events occur in rapid succession, and while Matthew, Luke, and John record lengthy sermons of Jesus, there are fewer of those in Mark. His language is vivid with many personal details, and frequently the key moment comes when the Lord asks a penetrating, life-illuminating question.

We're looking now at the seventh chapter of this gospel, and the question before us, in verse 18, is "Are you so dull?" The Lord asks this of his disciples. Some translations read, "Don't you understand?" But I think the New International Version is wise in the choice of words here. "Are you so dull? Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'?" Jesus asks this question with some impatience. "Don't you get it yet? Haven't you figured it out? This is important!" He demonstrates concern that his disciples aren't paying attention to the content of his life and message. Having expressed his impatience, he goes on to speak of the specific area of concern in this context, namely what makes a person unclean.

This is not really familiar language to us-being clean or unclean is a ceremonial determination that doesn't seem relevant today. But, I hope that we'll see before we're done that this has very profound application to us, even though it comes in an unfamiliar package.

Mark sets the scene in the first four verses of chapter 7:

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

The issue here is not hygiene. Observant Jews were required to wash their hands in a ritual manner to show their devotion to God. Jesus' disciples were being castigated by the Pharisees and Scribes for failure in this regard.

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"

We've seen Jesus interact with the Pharisees and Scribes earlier in Mark. Some of Jesus' questions we've already considered arose from the tension between the conservative Jewish practice and the freedom that the Lord taught. In chapter 2, Jesus was accused of blasphemy, and in chapter 3, he was accused of breaking the Sabbath. Mark doesn't need to explain those issues because most people who had any contact at all with Judaism would know that to break the Sabbath was to violate one of the Ten Commandments. Keeping the Sabbath was one

thing that identified the Jews as a people. Observers would also understand the seriousness of a charge of blasphemy. But the issue here is so arcane that Mark has to give an explanation. God's commands are not being transgressed, only the traditions of the elders.

Note the Lord's passionate response in verse 6: "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites..." In verse 18, he calls his disciples "dullards." Hypocrites and fools. The Pharisees don't get it, and Jesus is concerned that his disciples don't get it either. So, to be sure that we get it, let's examine the issues of cleanness and uncleanness and their significance.

The core issue is rejection by God, and this passage ends with Jesus' words about the wickedness of the heart. We need to be cleansed by God. Yet, the argument that Jesus has with the Pharisees is not about God. Instead, Jesus argues against the traditions of the elders, man-made rules that label a person acceptable or not acceptable. The issue of ritual defilement is ultimately about unworthiness before God, and questions of meal-time acceptability lead away from what really matters.

Recall the pictures used in the New Testament to describe good news. Some images use the language of accounting. We realize that we can never pay the enormous debt that we owe. However, it is paid by Christ, who balances the scales so we are free of our debts. Some images use the language of a court room. As the black-robed judge with a furrowed brow stares down and declares, "Guilty as charged," Christ intervenes, pays the price for our sins, and accepts the punishment that should have been ours. We walk out of the court room free because we're forgiven our sins. Still other images use the language of adoption. The orphan who has no home, no family, no name, and no standing is adopted by a father and placed in a family, becoming a son or daughter of God.

All of this marvelous imagery helps to explain why the gospel is such good news. An additional salvation image is found in Mark 7. The defiled person is made clean. The unworthy one, the one who doesn't measure up, the one who can't meet the standard is brought within the circle of God's love. Our Lord opposes any "traditions of men" that undermine the good news of our acceptance in God's presence. Verses 6-13:

**He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:
"These people honor me with
their lips, but their hearts are far
from me.
They worship me in vain; their
teachings are but rules taught
by men. (cf Isaiah 29:13)**

**You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."
And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."**

Jesus exposes his accusers as hypocrites. The fourth of the Ten Commandments is "Honor your father and mother." But the traditions of that time said that if you would rather limit the amount of provision given to your parents, you could set aside a sum of money and declare it *Corban*-devoted to God. Because that money now has a "religious" purpose, you don't have to use any of it to care for your parents. God-language can be used to

avoid the requirements of love.

We are more guilty of such behavior than we want to acknowledge. We are devoted to the church, to our families, to whatever-yet how unavailable we are to difficult people, to outsiders, to those who are hard to love. We excuse ourselves for it because what we're doing is important. It is for the church. It's God stuff. In truth, however, it is hypocrisy. Our lips speak of God, but our hearts are far from him, and we use religious jargon to avoid what is important.

Then Jesus turns to his disciples and calls them "dullards." He expresses concern for their inability to see and react as they should. Verses 14-23:

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'"

After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")

He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"

Jesus is making a very significant point: being good at religious performance is a dangerous thing. It will distance you from God and make you like these hypocrites. "The name of the Lord is on their lips, but their hearts are from him."

In speaking to his disciples, Jesus is saying, "Don't you get it? Don't you understand that all of these traditions are meaningless?" Jesus knew that if his own disciples couldn't declare that such things as food and clothing and titles don't matter, no one would.

God isn't concerned with whether we eat this vegetable or cook with that pot. There is no eternal significance to having this degree or that title or earning a certain salary. Even though the world regards these things, they aren't important to God.

Now some might expect Jesus to turn to the people and say, "You don't have to do these things to become acceptable. You're great just the way you are." But Jesus does not say you're okay just the way you are. He says you're much worse off than you thought. The external standards don't mean anything. What does matter is the heart. The problem is that your heart is desperately wicked. It is filled with adulteries and anger and arrogance and lies. Your problem is your heart.

Some of you may know the character Stewart Smalley, created by actor/comedian Al Franken. Stewart Smalley has participated in every conceivable self-help opportunity, and his famous line is, "I'm good enough. I'm smart enough. And, doggone it, people like me." Sometimes we mistakenly think that is what the gospel is all about. We are much more likely to think well of ourselves than to think badly of ourselves. Verse 21 contains a terrible list-evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice and so on. Jesus tells them, "You're in terrible shape, much worse than you thought." Then he walks away.

So, why is Jesus' antipathy to false religion good news? It is good news, ultimately, because Jesus says we've got a heart problem, and he's inviting us to come to him for help. Jesus is the Great Physician who can fix what is broken in us, what makes us contaminated, unacceptable. His diagnosis is an invitation to appeal to him to change our hearts.

Jesus tells us the truth about what makes us unclean, and he invites us to come to him for help with it. But he is passionately concerned that we care about what is really worth caring about, that we not hate ourselves for things that don't matter, that we not spend ourselves to get what is worthless. He is concerned that we not long for the approval and the cleansing that is offered by people who can't provide it, who will leave us with nothing, who will teach us to use God-language when our hearts are far from him. He insists that we know what the real problem is and stop trying to solve it with false solutions. Our hearts are the real problem, and it is our hearts that Jesus came to change.

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Mark 7:1-23

8th Message

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