

Exegetical Notes, Mark 7:1-23
“What Makes You Clean?”

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Mark 7:1-23

Verse 1-4

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.)

- Because Jesus’ fame was spreading, the religious leaders in Jerusalem sent a delegation of Pharisees and teachers to “check him out.” These leaders were standing around carefully watching what Jesus and his disciples did.
- The leaders observed that Jesus disciples did not observe the tradition of ceremonial washing of hands before eating. It is important to understand that the problem was not that the disciples were eating with dirty hands. The issue was the observance of a traditional religious custom. The disciples had not conformed to this tradition.
- This custom was considered binding upon all Jews. Those who did not observe it were considered unworthy, or unclean. They could not enter worship.

Verse 5

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?”

- The group pointed out their concerns directly to Jesus. They were accusing his disciples of being “unacceptable.”

Verse 6-8

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.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

- Hearing their question, Jesus confronted the group from Jerusalem with the Scripture. He quoted Isaiah 29:13 to them and applied it to them, accusing them of being hypocritical. He accused them of holding tight to their traditions while forsaking the law of God, the Scripture. He claimed that they made their traditions as important, if not more important, than God’s word.

Verse 9-13

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 then proceeded to back up his accusation with an example of how they use their tradition to supercede the Bible.
- He first quoted the Scripture to them. (See Exodus 20:12, 21:17, Deuteronomy 5:16, and Leviticus 20:9.) He points out that these verses require persons to honor their parents by caring for them and forbidding that anyone “curse” their parents.
- He then points out how the traditions of the Jews violated these Biblical principles. The religious leaders said that if you took the money it would cost to care for your aging parents and gave it to them to use in the Temple, you were free from the obligation you had to your parents.
- He said that this was a clear example of their hypocrisy. Their traditions actually abridged the law.

Verse 14-15

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.’

- Jesus called the crowd aside to teach them on the basis of his exchange with the delegation of leaders from Jerusalem. He taught the people that it was not outward things that made a person acceptable to God but that such things were determined by the outcomes of a person’s life.
- (Those who are astute will notice that verse 16, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” is omitted from the NIV text. That is because this verse is not found in the oldest Greek manuscripts.)

Verse 17-19

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.”)

- When they were alone with him, the disciples approached Jesus about what his teaching meant. Apparently, they were the ones who did not have ears to hear.
- First, Jesus criticized them for their dullness.
- Then he explained that that which you eat does not make you unacceptable to God. The Jews practiced all kinds of dietary regulations. Jesus declared that the issue is not what you eat or do not eat.

Verse 20-23

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 explained that evil thoughts lead to evil actions and that these are the kinds of things that make people unacceptable to God.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *What Makes You Clean?* They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen*. They are used here by permission.)