



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

Mark 7:1-23 True Holiness and 'That which defiles' (1 August)

The Pharisees and Scribes come from Jerusalem; it appears that the religious establishment has heard about Jesus and has sent a delegation to find out what is going on. The tension between Jesus and the Jewish leadership rises to a new level as they discuss the theme of purity.

In the Old Testament, God regularly said to Israel, 'Be holy as I am holy' (eg Lev 11:44-45). Holiness and purity have been concerns of Mark in a number of ways – when, eg, Jesus casts out impure spirits (1:21-28; 3:11), cures leprosy (1:40-44) and eats with impure sinners (2:16). Now in Ch.7, these verses show how this theme of holiness may be seen in Jesus' replacement of ritual purity with purity of the heart; sin is not about failure to keep man-made rules, but about the state of the human heart. Thus he redefines the nature of holiness for God's people.

This passage's length, bluntness and concentration of OT quotations emphasises the importance of Jesus' teaching on ritual purity and food laws. In cancelling them, Jesus is perhaps anticipating the mission to the Gentiles and their inclusion in God's people simply through faith in him. What Jesus brings is a newness based on an understanding of where evil in its various forms really comes from (v.22-23 – a sobering and specific list): it comes from our hearts, not from outside. We are sinful people and need cleansing. And evil thoughts can produce truly harmful actions, violating basic moral commandments (v.21-22).

Jesus speaks quite harshly against the religious leaders as he says that their focus is on their traditions and that this may lead to mere lip service rather than a devotion of the heart. He is particularly blunt in his condemnation of hypocrisy (v.6-8). He says that actions which are wrongly motivated, merely external and not from the heart, indicate that a person is far from God. And an emphasis on human traditions rather than teachings from God may also show a misunderstanding of how the Lord wants people to serve him.

1. What traditions do you hold to that you would not want to see changed? When would you be willing for those traditions to be altered or even abandoned?

2. What sort of traditions do we observe today that can get in the way of really honouring and serving God?
3. Summarise the principles Jesus lays down in these verses, which can help us know when a tradition is harmful and needs to be done away with.
4. Religious tradition may leave us far from God. What brings us close to God?
5. In what ways do we sometimes emphasise external appearance over internal reality?
6. In what ways are the Pharisees hypocrites? What is the danger of hypocrisy in the church today, both individually and corporately?
7. How might we apply Jesus' teaching in v.17-23?
8. Jesus tells us what makes a person defiled. What makes us clean? See 1John 1:7-9.
9. How does Jesus link up the mistake of the Pharisees with the mistake God's people have made in centuries past (see v.6-7)? In what ways do we fall into the same error today?



When traditions collide. - How do you feel about traditions?

