

## Worthless Worship

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Mark 7:1-13

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Mark's gospel is primarily focused on the *works* of Jesus – the things He did. But chapter 7 is a bit different. It's not the works of Jesus that are most prominent in chapter 7; rather, it's His *words*. Up to this point, Mark has written about Jesus' *miracles* (i.e. casts out demons, heals the sick, cleanses lepers, restores movement to the paralytic, calms storms, stops bleeding, raises the dead, feed the multitudes, and walks on water). To say that Jesus has been incredibly busy in His first two years of ministry would be a huge understatement. But chapter 7 brings a shift in emphasis from Jesus' *miracles* to His *message*, from things He has *done* to things He has *said*. The passage before us this morning is a sobering picture of what the sinful nature is capable of doing to God's Word. Our sinful nature is constantly looking for loopholes that allow us to do what we want, when we want, and how we want. So devious is the human heart that we will even at times try to make our actions look "spiritual" to justify their means and maintain our reputation. But Jesus isn't content with what the outside looks like. He is much more concerned with the condition of our heart – our motives. What we do is important, but *why* we do what we do is more important still. In our text this morning and next Sunday, Jesus will teach us about worship that pleases God and worship that repulses God. Let's turn our attention to our text. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit pens these words:

*Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, 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.) 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?" 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; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 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)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus*

*making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.” Mark 7:1–13*

Brothers and sisters, “The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever” Isaiah 40:8.

## **I. JESUS IS CONFRONTED WITH WORTHLESS WORSHIP (v.1-5)**

*Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, 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.) 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?”*

Jesus and His disciples have now returned to Galilee, more specifically Gennesaret, from their short stay in Bethsaida. Remember, Bethsaida is the small city just off the Northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus had taken His disciples to rest after their ministry in Nazareth. While rest may have been the intention, we learned the last couple weeks that this short trip to Bethsaida ended up being packed with ministry for Jesus and the disciples. The crowds appeared again, Jesus spoke to them about the Kingdom of God, cured those who had need of healing, and then multiplied the small provisions the disciples had and fed the 5,000 (cf. Luke 9:10-17). That’s where we left off last week.

Now, having arrived in Gannesaret, Jesus and the disciples are promptly met by a group of Pharisees and scribes who had come down from Jerusalem. Who are these fellas? The word Pharisee likely comes from the Hebrew word parash, which means to “separate” or “detach”. They were known for their personal piety and strict observance of the Mosaic Law. In Matthew 23 Jesus told His disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat” Matthew 23:2. To sit on Moses’ seat meant the scribes and Pharisees put themselves in the position of teachers of the Law. Mark tells us the scribes and Pharisees Jesus interacts with in our text are from Jerusalem. This is no insignificant detail. Jerusalem was the epicenter of Jewish thought and spirituality. This group of scribes and Pharisees were the executives from corporate.

One would think that Jesus would have been friends with such a group. The scribes and Pharisees were Jewish. Jesus was also Jewish. The scribes and Pharisees held Moses in high regard. Jesus also thought highly of Moses. The scribes and Pharisees were teachers of the Law. Jesus said, “I have not come to abolish [the Law and prophets] but to fulfill them” Matthew 5:17. But, for as much as they seemingly had in common, Jesus was no friend of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus has already butted heads a number of times with this group in Mark’s gospel. Remember, when the scribes and

Pharisees saw Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Mark 2:16. Later in chapter 2, when some saw John’s disciples and the Pharisees fasting, they asked Jesus, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Mark 2:18. When Jesus and His disciples were gathering heads of grain on the Sabbath, the Pharisees came to Him and said, “Look, why are they (His disciples) doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” Mark 2:24. Later, that same Sabbath day, when Jesus healed the man with a withered hand, the Pharisees went out immediately and held a counsel with the Herodians to figure out how they might destroy Him (cf. Mark 3:6). Jesus is a friend of sinners, but he is no friend of the scribes and Pharisees. Here again we see Jesus butt heads with the religious leaders of His day.

## **THE SPARK THAT IGNITED THE CONTROVERSY**

Mark wastes no time telling us what the dispute is over this time. In verse 2 he tells us, “They saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.” It’s presumable that the scribes and Pharisees didn’t observe Jesus’ disciples sitting down to a meal. Remember, they were constantly on the go. Twice Mark has told us that neither Jesus nor His disciples had time to eat. The disciples had just left the feeding of the 5,000 with twelve leftover baskets of bread – one for each of them. It’s likely that the disciples at some point during the day had eaten some of that bread as they were on the go. And this caught the watchful eye of the scribes and Pharisees.

The word “defiled,” “impure,” or “unclean” in verse 2 is key in this passage. These are all a translation of the Greek word “*koinos*.” Originally “*koinos*” meant what was common to everybody - like the *Koiné* (common) Greek. But in later Greek it came also to mean, as here, what is vulgar or profane. The next step was the ceremonially unclean. The scribes and Pharisees were not objecting because the disciples were eating with dirty hands but, rather, because they had not gone through the accepted purification rituals before eating with their hands.

## **THE RISE OF TRADITION**

Early Jewish rabbis promoted the idea that Moses had received two laws on Mt. Sinai – The written Torah and the oral Mishnah. The Torah meant, first and foremost, the Ten Commandments, but its meaning also included the first five books of the Old Testament or, as they are called, the Pentateuch. But the Jews also believed that God had given Moses an oral law, called the Mishnah, that was also to be passed on to the people of Israel. This is what Mark is referencing when he speaks about the “tradition of the elders”.

In general, the Torah was understood as policy. Its commandments declared *what* God decreed, but not always *how* those commandments were to be fulfilled. As a result, the Torah alone was believed to be too ambiguous to establish and govern the Jewish community. The oral tradition, on

the other hand, as preserved in the Mishnah, prescribed in infinite detail how the intent of the Torah ought to be fulfilled in actual circumstances. Thus, the Mishnah came to be known as the “fence” around the Torah to protect the integrity of the written law by elaborating and expanding upon it until literally thousands and thousands of little rules and regulations governing every possible action and every possible situation in life were spoken about.<sup>1</sup> You’ll see in a moment how oppressive this was. This is what Jesus was referring to in Matthew 23:4 when He said, “[The scribes and Pharisees] tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”

## **CEREMONIAL HANDWASHING**

It was this oral tradition that the scribes and Pharisees were up in arms about. Again, look at verse 3. Mark writes, “For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders.” There were definite and rigid rules for the washing of hands. Before every meal, and between each of the courses, the hands had to be washed, and they had to be washed in a certain way. It was believed that a person who ate with unclean hands was subject to the attacks of a demon called Shibta.

The water for washing had to be kept in special large stone jars, so that it was unmixed and remained unclean. First, the hands were held with finger tips pointing upwards; water was poured over them and had to run at least down to the wrist; the minimum amount of water was one quarter of a log, which is equal to one and a half egg-shells full of water. While the hands were still wet each hand had to be cleansed with the fist of the other.

At this stage, the hands were wet with water; but that water was now unclean because it had touched unclean hands. So, next, the hands had to be held with finger tips pointing downwards and water had to be poured over them in such a way that it began at the wrists and ran off at the finger tips. After this had been done, the hands were clean. To fail to do this was in Jewish eyes, not to be guilty of bad manners, not to be dirty in the health sense, but to be unclean in the sight of God.<sup>2</sup> To the Pharisaic and Scribal Jew, that was worship. It was ritual, ceremonial regulations like that which they considered to be essence of the service of God. True worship was buried under a mass of taboos and rules.

## **MANY OTHER TRADITIONS**

Look at verse 4. Mark writes, “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.”

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<sup>1</sup> James R. Edwards, *PNTC: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 208.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, 164-165.

To a pious Jew, a Gentile was unclean; food touched by a Gentile was unclean; any vessel touched by a Gentile was unclean. When a strict Jew returned from the marketplace, he immersed not only his hands, but his whole body in clean water to take away the taint he might have acquired. That's only the tip of the iceberg. Certain animals were unclean (Leviticus 11:1-47). A leper was unclean; tax collectors were unclean, a woman during menstruation and after child-birth was unclean, and anyone who touched a dead body was unclean. It's interesting to note that Jesus and His disciples have been with lepers (1:40), tax collectors (2:13), menstruating women (5:25), and dead bodies (5:35). Not only was Jesus "unclean" by definition, but He had set Himself up as an opponent to the scribes and Pharisees' prescribed method of worship.

Listen to the extent of the oral law concerning uncleanness. A hollow vessel made of pottery could contract uncleanness inside but not outside. It didn't matter who or what touched it outside, but it did matter what touched it inside. If a vessel became unclean, it must be broken. But it had to be broken in a particular way. No unbroken piece must remain that could hold enough oil to anoint the little toe. It gets better! A flat plate, without a rim, could not become unclean, but a plate with a rim could. If vessels made with leather, bone or glass were flat they could not contract uncleanness, but if they were hollow they could become unclean outside and inside. If they were unclean they must be broken, but the break had to leave a hole big enough for a medium-sized pomegranate to pass through. A three-legged table could contract uncleanness. If it lost one or two legs it could not, but if it lost three legs it could, for then it could be used as a board and a board could become unclean. Things made of metal could become unclean, except a door, bolt, lock, or hinge. Wood used in metal utensils could become unclean, but metal used in wood utensils could not. Thus a wooden key with metal teeth could become unclean; but a metal key with wooden teeth could not. Weary yet?

To the scribes and Pharisees, these rules and regulations were the essence of worship. To observe them was to please God, to break them was to sin. You see, when it came to matters of worship and relating to God, Jesus and the religious leaders spoke vastly different languages. These washing rituals not only indicated a wrong attitude toward people (Gentiles), but they also conveyed a wrong idea about sin and personal holiness. Jesus made it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that true holiness, true worship, was a matter of inward affection and attitude and not just outward actions and associations.

## **WHEN TRADITION BECOMES KING**

The problem with their rules is that they were not from God, they were "the traditions of the elders". The "traditions of the elders" came into being with good intentions. But in an effort to protect the Law from people, the ancient Jews added to that Law. They added restrictions that went beyond the letter of the Law. The Jewish leaders believed that their traditions helped people keep

the Law better and they believed their traditions protected the Law from the people. But before we criticize our Jewish friends, perhaps we should examine what influence tradition may have had on us. It's possible we may be guilty of adding to or replacing God's truth with our own traditions.

## **THE BURNING QUESTION**

Look at verse 5. Mark writes, "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?" Why do you suppose the religious leaders asked Jesus this question instead of asking His disciples? The scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for an explanation of His disciples' conduct because, as their teacher, He was responsible for them. They suspected that the disciples' failure to wash properly indicated that Jesus disregarded all the traditions of the elders. This is emphasized by the word "walk". To "walk" was a Hebrew figure of speech that referred to a habitual conduct (cf. Psalm 1:1). The religious leaders took note that there was a distinct difference in the way Jesus and His disciples lived. They didn't walk according to all the added tradition of the elders (ancients) and this infuriated them. These washings were commanded by tradition, not by scripture. They were an additional requirement not prescribed by the Word of God.

## **II. JESUS CONDEMNS WORTHLESS WORSHIP (v.6-9)**

*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; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"*

It's interesting to note that Jesus doesn't directly answer the question posed by the scribes and Pharisees. The question was, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" Jesus doesn't answer their questions because they aren't looking for a reasoned, well-intentioned answer. Instead of playing into their hands, Jesus exposes the scribes and Pharisees as frauds.

## **HEARTS AND LIPS THAT DON'T AGREE**

Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of hypocrisy. He calls them hypocrites (**ὑποκριτής** - hypokrites). The word hypokrites has an interesting and revealing history. It begins by meaning simply one who answers; it goes on to mean one who answers in a set dialogue or a set conversation, that is to say an actor; and finally it means, not simply an actor on the stage, but one whose whole life is a piece of acting without any sincerity. Anyone to whom worship is a legal matter, anyone to whom worship means carrying out certain external rules and regulations,

anyone to whom worship is entirely connected with the observation of certain rituals and keeping certain spiritual taboos is in the end bound to be, in this sense, a hypocrite. The reason is because he believes that he is a good man if he carries out the correct acts and practices, no matter what his heart and his thoughts are like.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus reminds the scribes and Pharisees of a well-known passage in Isaiah 29:13 that condemns their worthless worship practices. Look at verses 6-7. Jesus says, “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; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” The heart is the part of man that God chiefly notices when it comes to worship. God reminds us in 1 Samuel 16:7, “The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

The bowed head and the bended knee, the grave face, the rigid posture, the regular response, and the formal amen – all these together do not make up a spiritual worshipper. The eyes of God look further and deeper. He requires the worship of the heart. It must not content us to take our bodies to church if we leave our hearts at home. The eye of man may detect no flaw in our service. Our minister may look at us with [approval]. Our neighbors may think us patterns of what a Christian ought to be. Our voice may be heard foremost in praise and prayer. But it is all worse than nothing in God’s sight if our hearts are far away. It’s only wood, hay, and stubble before Him who discerns thoughts, and reads the secrets of the inward man (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:12)<sup>4</sup>

Legalism or spiritual hypocrisy takes account of a man's outward actions; but it takes no account of his heart. He may well be meticulously serving God in outward things, and bluntly disobeying God in inward things--and that is hypocrisy. There is no greater religious peril than that of worship with outward observance. There is no more common religious mistake than to mistake goodness with certain acts of worship. The fundamental question is, how is a man’s heart towards God and towards his fellow men? And, if in his heart there are enmity, bitterness, grudges, pride, not all the outward displays of worship in the world will make him anything other than a hypocrite.

**Jesus is showing a clear progression in the text:**

- A. The scribes and Pharisees leave (neglect or abandon) the commandments of God (v.8).
- B. The scribes and Pharisees became experts at rejecting (setting aside) the commandments of God (v.9).
- C. The scribes and Pharisees make void (cancel or nullify) the Word of God (v.13).

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, 168.

<sup>4</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 107-108.

Said another way, the Scribes and Pharisees:

- A. Added their traditions to Scripture.
- B. Placed their traditions on the same level as Scripture.
- C. Honored their traditions above Scripture.

### **III. JESUS CORRECTS WORTHLESS WORSHIP (v.10-13)**

*For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 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)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."*

#### **A BRILLIANT WAY TO BREAK THE LAW WITHOUT GUILT**

Jesus gives the scribes and Pharisees an example of how their self-serving traditions have replaced the Word of God. The scribes and Pharisees professed to honor Moses through whom God commanded the Israelites to honor their parents and threatened disobedience with death (Exodus 20:12; Exodus 21:17), but they found loopholes that allowed them to wiggle out of this responsibility.

Corban is an English transliteration of a Greek transliteration of a Hebrew word that means "gift." Corban was essentially an offering that involved an irrevocable vow of dedication to God. Whatever it was that was dedicated to God couldn't be used for any other purpose. But there was no prescribed way the offering had to be used so this practice was often used as a loophole. In other words, whatever was offered or dedicated to God was used as a way of evading the observance of other clear laws of God. Sound twisted? It was.

Jesus makes issue with one prominent way that this tradition of corban was used in a self-serving manner. It was a common practice in Jesus' day to make an offering of your wealth to the Lord by invoking a vow of corban. By making a vow or corban to the Lord, a person would keep their wealth throughout their life until death when it would be given – if there was anything left - to the temple / priest upon their death. This was a way to shield wealth. If your parents needed assistance in their old age, you could simply refuse to help because your wealth had been set-aside for God. This tradition of corban, though it sounds very spiritual, was just a way to get around the clear teaching to honor one's father and mother (cf. Exodus 20:12).<sup>5</sup> A creditor could invoke corban on a debtor. It was also a way for the priest to make a few bucks because,

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<sup>5</sup> Layman's Bible Commentary, *Matthew & Mark vol. 8* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2008), 170.

according to church history, they often charged 50 shekels from a man and 30 shekels from a woman to cancel corban. Ultimately, the practice of corban annulled the moral commandments of God in favor of a ritualistic practice. But Jesus exposed the scribes and Pharisees with both the Law (Moses) and the prophets (Isaiah). To God, their worship was worthless. It was hypocrisy. If all we are concerned about are the externals, our worship is bitter and God rejects it.

### **A FEW THINGS TO CONSIDER**

- A. It's easy to think that others are legalists and we, ourselves, are not.
- B. Legalism spreads quickly and easily.
- C. Legalism will cause you to look down on others.
- D. Legalism, when marketed as Christianity, makes Jesus look unattractive.

Legalism is the antithesis of the gospel. Legalism says, "These are the things you must do." But the gospel declares, "This is the work Jesus has accomplished." One will send you to hell striving and the other will save your soul on the basis of the work of another.

Jesus was attacking a system which put rules and regulations before the claim of human need. The commandment of God was that human love should come first; the commandment of the scribes was that legal rules and regulations should come first. Jesus was quite sure that any regulation which prevented a man from giving help where help was needed was nothing less than a contradiction of the law of God.

### **CLOSING BENEDICTION**

As we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning, hear these words from the prophet Samuel, "For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" 1 Samuel 16:7. And all God's people said, "Amen!" Go in peace!