

December 11, 2016

## **Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord** ***Clean Hands and Dirty Hearts***

**Mark 7: 1 – 37**

Once again we are given three stories that Mark has purposely put together. We have this long section on a confrontation Jesus has with the religious crowd; followed by a story of deliverance and a story of healing. At first glance these stories seem somewhat unrelated but we need to remember that Mark was not writing a history of Jesus, but a gospel that was meant to show who Jesus was and what He had come into the world to do. And Mark purposely cherry-picks the stories to make his point. And here he puts together an extended section on the nature of defilement, an encounter with a pagan woman, and the healing of a deaf man.

To make sense of all this we need to zero in on the Old Testament quote that comes in verses 6 -7: *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."* Mark is telling us that Jesus is saying something here about genuine heart transformation and authentic worship. He takes this centuries old prophecy and applies it to the people of His day. And then He diagnoses the problem, emphasizing it three times. First in verses 8-9: *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!"* And then He says it again in verse 13: *making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.*

What becomes clear is that Mark is saying that when we reject the word of God, the commandments of God, we are rejecting God Himself. In chapter six it was the story of the rejection of God's *messengers* which pointed to a rejection of God. Here it is the story of the rejection of the *word* of God which points to a rejection of God. And so what I think Mark is showing us here in this section is something about the way in which men reject God, why they reject Him, and ultimately, how not to reject Him. And all of this revolves around this story of the commandments of men versus the commandments of God.

The complaint against Jesus' disciples was that they did not walk according to the traditions of the elders. *"Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"* They were not accused of breaking God's laws. They were accused of breaking man's laws. And here, the traditions of the elders to which they were referring was what was called the oral law. This was something that had grown out of the written law given to Israel at Mt. Sinai which was the oral interpretation of how those laws played out in life. It was preserved in something called the Mishnah which over time became more important than the law itself. Although it purported to explain God's law, it eventually went far beyond the law. For example the command to keep the Sabbath holy and do no work on it spawned a multitude of explanations of just what exactly constituted work on the Sabbath.

This was brought home to me when I was in Jerusalem a few years ago. We were visiting the supposed burial place of King David and as we were leaving, our guide called me aside and asked if I wanted to be the Sabbath Gentile. I had no idea what he was talking about but thought it might be interesting to find out. So he told me to follow this Jewish guy all rigged out in his Sabbath gear and do whatever he asked me to do, which was problematic as I spoke no Hebrew and he spoke no English. So I followed him to a curtained off section of the room where all the women who had come to the shrine were. Up to that point I hadn't realized men and women couldn't visit the shrine together. I was just hoping at that point that I wouldn't be arrested for trespassing in the women's section, but the guy I was following seemed unconcerned so I kept walking.

He took me over to a little dark room on the side, went inside and shut the door and began trying to communicate in sign language. He picked up an extension cord with multiple plugs in place and made motions with it toward a receptacle in the wall. After a few moments I understood that he wanted me simply to plug it in. Which I did, and he smiled and clapped me on the back and out we went. Apparently the command to keep the Sabbath holy and do no work meant that you couldn't plug electric appliances in. What went through my mind at that moment was that this guy had just gone through a lot of work to do no work. And I'm not sure that the essence of God's law about the Sabbath has anything to do with electrical outlets.

Now here are the scribes and Pharisees all upset that Jesus' disciples are not washing their hands before they eat. This had nothing to do with being sanitary as you might suppose. Apparently some of the disciples did wash their hands because Mark says that only some of the disciples ate with unwashed hands, but evidently there wasn't a clear consensus among the disciples on the issue. And the reason there wasn't was because washing your hands before a meal was entirely ritualistic and not hygienic. This practice came from the Old Testament requirement for priests to wash their hands before entering the tabernacle. There were no other required hand washings for the general population except the one for those who had touched some bodily discharge.

But over the years, the Jews had built this amazing list of the things that would defile a person, or make a person unclean and when you needed to wash. Here Mark tells us they had all kinds of laws about the defilement of the market place and about the washing of pots and cups and copper vessels and dining couches. In fact there are actually thirty chapters in the Mishnah, the oral law, about the ceremonial cleansing of pots and pans. Because it wasn't about sanitation, it's about ritual cleansing. This is what you do to be clean before God.

When the Law was handed down, there were some who said, "We need to build a fence around the Law. We need to make sure that that Law is kept. If we fence it in with explanations then we won't get close to violating the Law." So the fence consisted of generation after generation of rituals and rules and ceremonies and behaviors of all kind, prohibitions, precepts to protect, supposedly, the Law of God. A tradition was established. And that's the accusation. Not that Jesus broke the Law, but that He violated the traditions.

The Pharisees were concerned with dirty hands, but Jesus tells them the problem goes deeper. *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.'* They were concerned with dirty hands but Jesus was concerned with dirty hearts. They were content with cleaning the outside so they could be close to God, but Jesus said they have a problem on the inside that keeps their hearts away from Him. In other words the defilement they are worried about comes from within, not without.

And the source of the problem is a rejection of the word of God. *8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."* In other words, 'You value what men say rather than what I say.' *9 And he said to them "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!* Then He gives them an example: *10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'* *11 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)--12 then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."*

Corban is a technical term in the priestly tradition of the Old Testament where its use always denotes an offering dedicated to God. Jesus was referring to this kind of dedication whose purpose was to place a ban on something, withdrawing it from common use and reserving it for sacred use. It did not necessarily mean that whatever was declared corban was actually given to God; it signified rather that it was being withdrawn from its intended use and was no longer available for an individual, as if it were really an offering. In this example by Jesus, if a son declared his property corban to his parents, he neither promised it to the temple, nor prohibited its use to himself, but he legally excluded his parents from benefitting from it. If mom and dad fall into need at some point and the son goes to the priest to withdraw the gift to give to his parents, the priest would not allow the gift to be withdrawn from corban.

Jesus said 'This is how you nullify the word of God by your tradition'. The word of God in Exodus 20 was '*Honor your father and mother*'. The priest was saying, 'But according to Numbers 30, your vow to God takes precedence over your duty to your parents.' But Jesus categorically rejects the idea of using one biblical commandment to negate another to justify your tradition over the word of God. Do you see what Jesus is saying here? What He is saying is that if you hold your traditions, or what the experts are saying, or what your culture says, or what your heart says, over and above the authority of the Scriptures, you're not worshipping God. If you let anything have a higher authority in your life than the word of God, you fail to worship Him. And you not only fail to worship God, you're actually worshipping yourself. You become your own God. Jesus is saying a failure to recognize and honor the unique authority of Scripture is a failure to recognize and honor the unique authority of God.

Tim Keller notes: '*Unless you're willing to conform and adjust your life to the authority of the Scripture, especially at the places where it contradicts your heart or your tradition or your culture or the experts or your friends, there's no way you can follow Jesus. The authority of the Bible and the authority of God and Jesus Christ stand or fall together*'.<sup>1</sup>

If it's all about the outside, if it's all about the the ritual, if it's all about behavior and not about the heart, then it is not the worship of God. *'In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'* Jesus didn't deny breaking the tradition, I believe He intentionally broke it. He had no respect for their whole traditional system. He ignored it. He swept it aside. It was meaningless. It was damning. It obliterated the truth, and it obscured God. One Jewish rabbi famously said, "*Whoever has his abode in the land of Israel and eats his food with washed hands may rest assured that he shall receive eternal life.*" Jesus blows that idea right out of the water. What His disciples were doing was not the problem. What the Pharisees and scribes were doing was a big problem. Instead of heading for eternal life, they were headed for hell with clean hands.

You see, if our problem is merely dirty hands, why would we need a Savior? Our problem is systemic, not superficial. Religious ritual can't begin to solve the problem. And Jesus lays out the problem for them: **14** *And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: 15 There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."* **17** *And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18* *And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, 19 since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?"* (Thus he declared all foods clean.) **20** *And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. 21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."*

The Bible tells us there is a fundamental problem with our heart. *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?* (Jeremiah 17:9) Jesus is saying that our defilement comes from inside, not outside. All the religious mumbo jumbo we could muster up cannot deal with the heart. What we need is heart surgery. What we need to do is let go all those religious efforts to make ourselves acceptable to God and embrace the gospel: *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26* *And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.* Ezekiel 36:25-26

Mark is highlighting one of the biggest problems we humans have. Ever since Adam grabbed a fig leaf to cover himself, we have worked to become our own saviors. We think that by doing stuff we can earn God's approval. We think that if we follow certain behaviors and do certain things that God will be happy with us. But look at the group Jesus is talking to. This was a group of men that were the most devout religious people on the face of the earth.

---

<sup>1</sup> Keller, T. J. (2013). *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

They had God's law and they were adamant about keeping God's law. They even made more rules in order to keep it. They were so religious and zealous about it that when the Son of God came on the scene and started healing people, feeding people, casting out demons and breaking their sacred traditions, they plotted His death. What was in their hearts was murder and out it came one bloody day in Jerusalem. They had worked hard to clean up the exterior while the interior was left undisturbed. They had clean hands and dirty hearts.

Mark is telling us here that we reject God by rejecting His word. It is not authoritative in our lives. We build up loopholes and work-a-rounds in our thinking that replace what He has said with ideas that are more comfortable for us to live with. We add things to His word and it becomes the word of God plus the rules of men. These Pharisees never dealt with the fundamental problem of sin that was on the inside which their cleansing rituals could never touch. They said they loved God but they never really loved what He said. Many people like the idea of God, but they have a lot of trouble with what He says. We don't like what He says about everlasting punishment so we reject or soften the doctrine of hell. We don't like what He says about sexuality and so we find what we think are loopholes. We don't like what He says about miracles so we explain them away. And we really don't like what He says about the state of our heart, and so we come up with alternative explanations for sin and other means of salvation.

But the key to knowing God is embracing His word. And Mark gives us that contrast in the next story: *24 And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. 25 But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.*

From the carefully cleansed Pharisees, Jesus now turns to an unwashed pagan. Jesus travels to the Gentile regions of Tyre and Sidon hoping for some peace and rest and is immediately confronted with the very opposite of the law-observing Pharisees, a Syrophenician woman. The difference could hardly have been more glaring. She was a woman, not a man, a Greek gentile, not a Jew, one of the infamous pagans of Syrian Phoenicia, and she had a daughter with an unclean spirit. Even Levi, a disciple from the ranks of the despised tax-collectors must have raised his eyebrows at this. Mark is making it clear that this woman was unclean in everyway and therefore disqualified in every sense from approaching any Jew, let alone a rabbi. And yet here she is on her knees to Jesus.

Mark says she fell down at Jesus feet and was begging Him. The word *begged* is a present progressive, which means she just kept on begging. No one could stop her. In fact, in Matthew 15, the other account, the disciples begged Jesus to stop her. She was persistent and they couldn't shut her up. She wouldn't let anyone move her out of the house and she won't take no for an answer. Why is she so persistent? Why is she so bold? I think it's because she is confronted by a situation that has no earthly solution. She has no answers for it. No one has any answers for it. Her daughter has an unclean spirit and nothing she knows can get rid of that. The only hope she has is sitting right in front of her.

And we might expect a gentle Jesus, a compassionate Jesus, a Jesus who is kind. But listen to how He answers her: **27** *And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."* You know, we might be ready to accept the words of a Jesus who is nice and gentle and kind, but we are rarely ready to accept the words of a Jesus who offends us. Here's this woman, out of her mind with fear and anxiety begging for a healing, and Jesus lumps her in with the dogs. Dogs in Jewish history and indeed in Scripture, hardly ever represent something positive. Almost all Old Testament passages portray dogs in a negative light because on the whole dogs were associated with uncleanness because they ate garbage, carrion and corpses. The term was used to describe worthless people, evil people. In the New Testament Jesus warns against entrusting what is sacred to dogs; and Paul refers to his Jewish religious opponents as dogs.

And the first thing Jesus says to this woman is 'I'm not going to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs'. What is our response to God when His word offends us? Listen to her response: **28** *But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* He says, 'Not going to give it to the dogs first'. And she says 'Yes, Lord'. She saw immediately what the scribes and Pharisees failed to see at all. She recognizes that the problem she has won't go away with anything less than divine intervention. And she won't leave without it. And she embraces His word.

Jesus' answer to her is interesting because it is not an outright refusal to give her anything. He says 'Let the children be served first', leaving open the option for the dogs to get something later. And He also doesn't use the normal word for dog here. He uses a word that means household pet, not some nameless wandering mongrel. What this implies is that even though they are just pets, they belong to the household and will be fed along with the children. And this analogy of children and pets suggests a relationship to Jesus because He would be the father who feeds the children – and their pets.

And the amazing thing is the way this woman enters into the parable. She acknowledges His mission priority and at the same time finds room for herself at the table. She uses the same word Jesus did for household pets, but she changes His word for children that meant biological children, to one that was more inclusive and meant both children and servants in the household. In some sense, this woman understood the mercies of God to extend beyond the genealogical borders of Israel to include the Gentile world. What she was saying was 'Yes, I understand the children get priority. But even the pets get fed when the children eat'.

This was amazing insight. Do you see what is going on here? She's saying, 'All right, I know I don't have any right to anything. I don't deserve a place at the table. But there's more than enough for the children for me to have just the crumbs that fall from their place'. In his commentary on this, James Edwards says, '*Indeed, she appears to understand the purpose of Israel's Messiah better than Israel does. Her pluck and persistence are a testimony to her trust in the sufficiency and surplus of Jesus: His provision for the disciples and for Israel will be abundant enough to provide for one such as herself...What an irony! Jesus seeks desperately to teach His chosen disciples – yet they are dull and uncomprehending; Jesus is reluctant to speak to a walk-on pagan woman, and after one sentence she understands His mission and receives His unambiguous commendation.*'<sup>2</sup>

---

2 James Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark*, (Eerdmans, 2002), 221.

She wasn't asserting her rights. She recognizes she has none, just like household pets. She understands completely her unworthiness in His eyes but she keeps on coming. Do you hear what she is saying? What she's saying is 'I'm not asking on the basis of my purity. I'm not asking on the basis of my goodness or deservedness. I'm not saying give me something I deserve based on my merit; I'm saying give me what I don't deserve based on your merit'. Luther's comment on this was, '*Here is a woman who understands the gospel*'. The fact is, this woman is the first person in the gospel of Mark to hear and understand the gospel. She is neither offended by His word, nor is she discouraged by it.

There is a great prayer by Thomas Cranmer in the Book of Common Prayer that is prayed at the Lord's Table service in Anglican churches. "*We do not presume to come to this thy Table (O merciful Lord) trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We be not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy.*"<sup>3</sup> Give me what I don't deserve based on Your mercy. And the invitation here is for us to step into this woman's shoes because she got the gospel. She got it, and she went home. **29** *And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter."* **30** *And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.*

And finally we have the story of the deaf man with a speech impediment. We won't read it again, but Mark uses a very singular word to describe this deaf man that is used no other place in the Bible except one other in Isaiah 35 and the prophecy of the Messiah: *Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."* **5** *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf (there's that word) unstopped; 6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;* Mark obviously wants us to identify this deaf man with this prophecy of the coming Savior. It's the only reason he would use this word.

It is as though Mark is saying to his readers, 'Do you see this? Do you see the blind eyes being opened, the ears of the deaf being unstopped, the mute singing for joy? Messiah has come! He is here! Your salvation has drawn nigh! God has come to save you!' But the strange thing about this prophecy is that Isaiah says He is coming with vengeance and the recompense of God, or with divine retribution. Is that how Jesus came? With vengeance and divine retribution? Where do we see that in the gospels? We don't. And yet we do. God sent His Son into the world and the vengeance of God, the divine retribution of God did not fall on us but on His Son. Sin had made life misery for the Syrophenician woman and her daughter, sin had stopped the deaf man's ears and garbled his tongue. It was a heart blackened by sin that was keeping these scribes and Pharisees from seeing their Messiah.

---

3 <http://www.biblesociety.org.au/news/not-worthy-to-gather-the-crumbs-from-under-the-table>

And on the cross the Son of God took that sin on Himself and was driven away from the table He deserved without a crumb so that we who do not deserve even a crumb from the table might be adopted into the family brought to the table to eat as sons and daughters. He became the sheep who was dumb before His shearers so that we might sing for joy. Embrace the promise of the gospel and get a new heart, a clean heart. Let the mercy of God overwhelm you this morning and melt all pride and self-righteousness and find yourself at the foot of the cross rejoicing in His great goodness to you.

*Heavenly Father,*

*Your word tells us that we have hearts that are naturally deceitful and desperately sick and what we need is heart surgery. We ask this morning that you would sprinkle us with clean water and cleanse us from all our idols. Remove our stony hearts and give us new hearts and a new spirit so that we might worship You in truth. We pray Lord for mercy. That same mercy You showed to that desperate woman and that deaf man that is not dependent on what we could do but on what You have done for us. We do not deserve even a crumb from Your table and yet You offer us a seat at Your table as beloved children, adopted into Your family through the sacrifice of Your Son on the cross, we pray in His precious name, Amen.*