

Clean from the inside out (Mark 7: 1-23)

The Tradition of the Elders

7 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' ⁶He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

⁹ Then he said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰For Moses said, "Honour your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die." ¹¹But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban" (that is, an offering to God)— ¹²then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.'

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'

¹⁷ When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

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Commentary

The "heart" of the matter

How is God to be worshipped and honoured? This is the question at the heart of the dispute between Jesus and the Jerusalem authorities. Both agree on the two greatest commandments: love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and love one's neighbour as one's self. Yet the Pharisaic interpretation of Torah according to the Purity System consistently pits love of neighbour against love of God. For Jesus, by contrast, the commandment to love God is fulfilled in love of neighbour. That conflict crystallises in this passage: for the scribes and Pharisees, love of God is fulfilled in scrupulous observance of the Law; for Jesus, the sort of purity that God requires is a matter of the heart.

The issue in question is contamination – “defilement”. What counts as “dirt”? How is contamination “transmitted”? If holiness is God-likeness, what sort of holiness reflects God's own character?

It is important not to see this merely as an interesting theological debate within the Judaism of Jesus' day, over an issue that has long since become irrelevant to us in our own time. For Jesus, it goes to the heart of the shape that the Kingdom takes in people's lives. If human holiness reflects God, what sort of God is reflected in the way in which we respond to our neighbour – particularly our neighbour in greatest need?

The debate over the “tradition of the elders” exposes, for Jesus, the interconnections between the heart of God, the heart of the Law (Torah) and the heart of the Kingdom of God. God is driven by compassion in the face of human need and suffering; the Law is fulfilled in the practice of justice for the weak and vulnerable; the Kingdom is thus the world “turned upside down” on behalf of the least first.

“The Pharisees and some of the scribes from Jerusalem” (7:1)

Jesus has just fed the huge crowd because “he had compassion on them” (6:34). The feeding has mirrored God's provision for the former Hebrew slaves in the wilderness. He has then walked on water – a demonstration of God's own authority over all creation (6:45-52). Mark could not have been much clearer in his presentation of Jesus: to encounter Jesus is to encounter God. The disciples fail to understand this (6:52); the people in the Genneserat region, by contrast, throng to Jesus with their sick, because they recognize in him God's compassionate response to their deepest, most intractable needs (6:53-56).

Mark's narrative concern, then, is with the response to Jesus-as-God's-presence by the various groups. It is at this point that he introduces “the Pharisees and some of the scribes from Jerusalem”. This is the opposition. They represent, as we have seen from the outset of Mark's story (2:6), the “long shadow of the cross”. Ironically, they should have been the first to celebrate Jesus as God's presence among them. They, of all people, steeped in the stories of the Hebrew Scripture (particularly Exodus, Elijah and Elisha, and the prophetic tradition), should have recognized Jesus as God's Good News, and welcomed the Kingdom he proclaimed.

Instead, they become the heart of the opposition to Jesus. The Pharisees have already begun to conspire to get rid of Jesus (3:6); the incident that provoked this response was a Sabbath healing. The “scribes who had come down from Jerusalem” have accused Jesus of being possessed by Be’elzebul (3:22).

Why are they so particularly blind to Jesus as God’s visible presence? Why are they unable to recognize Jesus and his message as God’s Good News? Mark is clear: various groups (particularly the disciples!) struggle to “get” Jesus. Yet the Pharisees and scribes represent a uniquely entrenched antipathy towards him. This is because of their interpretation of the Law. They are the guardians of the Purity System and Debt System that turns what ought to be the emancipatory Good News story of God’s compassion, grace and justice into an oppressive system that enslaves the poorest and most marginalized (1:35-2:12; 23-27).

“Eating with defiled hands” (7:2-4)

Mark has set up the issue of defilement/contamination with careful irony. Jesus has miraculously fed 5,000 people in the wilderness, where everyone would have eaten with “defiled hands”. That this is clearly a sign of God’s approval and blessing is emphasized not only by the echoes of the wilderness feedings in the Exodus story, but also by the twelve baskets of leftovers. He has been mobbed by crowds of sick people around Genneserat, who “beg to touch him” (6:56); however, instead of Jesus becoming defiled by their touch, they have been healed. Mark could not make the point more clearly: if contamination is spread by touch, it is Jesus who “contaminates” the hungry and the sick with grace, food and healing!

The “Traditions of the Elders” (7:5)

The Pharisees and scribes object to the fact that Jesus and his disciples do not observe the *halakha* – the Oral Law – about washing in preparation for meals. Together with the Written Law, the *halakha*, or enumeration of how the Written Law applied in specific instances to regulate the behavior that God expected of Israel, made up the interpretation of the Law in Jesus’ society. The Pharisees were distinctive in maintaining (over against the Sadducees, for instance) that both the Written Law (Torah) and Oral Law (*halakha*) went back to Sinai. Mark notes that the Pharisaic interpretation was dominant: “The Pharisees and *all the Jews* do not eat without first washing their hands thoroughly, in obedience to the tradition of the elders” (7:3). The challenge to Jesus in 7:5 is therefore, “Why do your disciples not observe *our* interpretation of the Law?”

“Human tradition” (7:6-9)

Jesus’ response is unequivocal: these are “human traditions”, not God’s Law. Significantly, they are “*your* traditions” (7:9) – ie “You have made them up and pass them off as God’s Law because they benefit *you!*” Here is the heart of Jesus’ opposition to the Purity System in the name of the Kingdom of God that put the least first.

We need to recognize that the Pharisees are the religious group to whom Jesus is theologically closest. Both had a vision of the Kingdom of God as a world ordered

according to the dual commandment to love God and neighbour. For the Pharisees, however, what prevented God from reigning was the threat of contamination. God's holiness, understood in terms of purity, meant that God was restricted to the Holy of Holies in the temple. The rest of the world was a "no-go area" because it was polluted. The solution, therefore, was to practice Torah observance as though the whole of Israel was the Holy of Holies; this would free God from the restrictive "prison" of the Holy of Holies.

Jesus' objection was that this scrupulous level of observance was impossible for any other than the urban elite of Jerusalem: the economic needs of the rural laboring peasants not only made this impossible, but also further oppressed them by making them law breakers and unclean. This meant that they were not only marginalized, but required to pay for the sacrifices to atone for their impurity.

This, in Jesus' view, was what drove the temple economy to the benefit of the authorities – the Pharisees and scribes. The "Traditions of the Elders" therefore functioned as divine legitimation to mask an exploitative system that blatantly served their own social, political and economic interests. This is what Jesus wants to unmask as the sort of "hypocrisy" for which Isaiah condemned the rulers (7:6-7).

Corban (7:9-13)

For Jesus, the Law was given by God to create a society that mirrored the Kingdom. It was motivated by divine compassion. Its purpose was to ensure human flourishing by meeting need, and therefore prioritized the most vulnerable. Holiness – God-likeness – was therefore expressed concretely in care for the poorest, the most vulnerable and the marginalized. This was the true test of Torah observance.

He therefore exposes the hypocrisy of the Purity System by turning to the way in which the Pharisees and scribes allowed wealthy children to escape their duties of care for elderly, vulnerable parents under the commandment to honour father and mother by declaring some of their assets as "Corban" – an offering to God.

The term is related to the Greek term for the temple treasury, *korbanas*. To declare money, property or other assets as "Corban" meant that they were offered to God and could no longer be used for "secular" purposes. This was allowed under the Oral Law. Jesus' accusation is that the guardians of Torah allowed unscrupulous children to declare some of their inheritance as a "tax write-off": money or property "dedicated to God" no longer counted as personal wealth. This meant that they could technically claim not to be able to afford to care for their parents in old age – the temple authorities would allow them to buy out of their obligation under God by a substantial donation to the treasury, in direct violation of the Written Law.

True defilement (7:14-23)

For Jesus, true defilement amounts to the systematic avoidance of our obligation to our neighbour. That happens when we do not see our neighbour's need through the lens of compassion, but as an inconvenient call upon our own advantage. These are the "evil intentions that come from inside – from the human heart" (7:21).

Having addressed the commandment to honour father and mother, Jesus goes on to echo the ways in which the behaviours targeted by the Ten Commandments are “crimes against our neighbour” (7:21-22). They are motivated by a desire to profit from our neighbour, rather than serve.

Significantly, Jesus does not echo the commandment to love God. This is because love of God is expressed in love of neighbour – in the embrace of responsibility for meeting our neighbour’s need. He is well aware of the human capacity to cloak evil in outward respectability and religiosity – and its corollary, which is to cloak defilement/contamination in outward acts of scrupulosity about washing and touching “dirty” things and people.

Jesus’ definitions of holiness, purity and defilement are very concrete: they have to do with intention. They are “heart matters”, evidenced not by what we can claim but by how we treat others. And it is the test case of how we treat the very least that defines what true Torah observance means, because compassion, mercy, generosity, liberation and welcome mirror God’s own heart and intentions.

“Jesus declared all foods clean” (7:19)

If “what goes into a person” has no power to defile, then the kosher laws are null and void. The covenant at Sinai established Israel as a “separate people”. Holiness was expressed in *difference* and *non-mixing* (separation). This included clothing (the prohibition on mixed fibres) and, most importantly, food.

Mark locates the expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles at this point in the narrative, with this editorial aside. It is a very small verse to bear such a huge weight of transition. It almost seems as though Jesus made this momentous declaration unawares.

This is precisely the impression Mark intends to create with his narrative here. The very next incident will be a meeting with a Gentile woman; the metaphor for the conversation will be the meal table; and Jesus will be tested by his own criterion of “what comes from within his own heart” by the encounter. This will be the point at which he realizes that there are no “no-go areas” for his own message and ministry: the Good News of the Kingdom of God embraces the Gentiles.