

Mark 7:1-23 - To eat, or not to eat, is that the question?

1. The most regrettable Thai...

<< Illustration – The most regrettable Thai >>

Why do I tell this story?

Two reasons.

First, today's passage presents the problem of eating with unclean hands.

And so we'll deal with in a moment.

But secondly, because part of the air we breath in our society is the message:

“What you put in, is what you get out.”

Or to put it another way, “You are what you eat.”

Or “Take care of your body, and your body will take care of you.”

Our world is so obsessed with the body-beautiful,
that we really think beauty is only skin-deep.

You only have to look at the statistics on the increase of cosmetic surgery
to know our society is obsessed with the superficial.

Or the number of specific diets that are trendy at the moment, <<ask audience? >>

“The paleo-diet, the lemon detox diet, the Atkins diet, the raw food diet... “

And so, today's passage speaks to us, with our skin-deep obsessions.

In fact, Jesus will confront our infatuation with our flesh.

And he will do so, through his confrontation with the Pharisees.

2. The Setting: A touchy subject (vv. 1-4)

Mark sets the scene for us in verses 1-4.

The Pharisees have travelled from the capital city, and their gaze fixes upon his disciples. This is quite a touchy subject.

The disciples are busted for their lack of cleanliness.

Now, this isn't your average, I've been playing in dirt and need to wash my hands

This is the specific ritual washing, observing "the traditions of elders".

In fact, there is a specific word used for describe the body part that gets washed.

The word is so specific that we don't actually know how it translates ("pugmare")

All we can infer is that the disciples haven't washed their special "thingos".

However, the important hint that Mark drops is the word "tradition".

v. 3 – "observing the **tradition** of the elders"

v. 4 – "many other **traditions** they observe".

Tradition, tradition, tradition... hold that thought...

The setting – the dirty disciples, the ritually clean Pharisees, and of course Jesus...

3. The Accusation: Walk this way? (v. 5)

And so the Pharisees and the teachers of the law ask Jesus an innocuous question. v. 5.

"Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

It seems innocent enough, "how come your disciples are different to the rest of us?"
And yet, there is an underlying accusation.

Now, we miss the accusation, because we miss the gravity of the question.
The gravity of the question lies in the phrase
"why do your disciples **not walk** according to the tradition."

And **walking** according to tradition of the elders was and is vital to the Jewish religion.
The leaders of Israel instructed the people on how to walk according to the Law.
That is, from when you get up in the morning, to when you go to bed at night,
There were instructions for every part of your daily routine.
There were instructions not only so you upheld the law,
But also so that you wouldn't even remotely come close to breaking the law.

In fact, the collection of writings that apply the Old Testament Law to every aspect of life were called the "Halakha", which is the Hebrew word for "walk".

So you have a set of traditions, written down in the "Halakha", "the walk"
Which interpreted the law for everyday life.

Now, come back to the question, v. 5.
"Why do your disciples not "walk" according to the tradition of the elders?"

Essentially, the Pharisees and scribes are accusing the disciples
Of breaking the Halakha, in the first instance,
And in the second instance, breaking the Law, the Torah.

4. Return Fire: Rejecting God's commandments (vv. 6-15)

However, unlike us, Jesus knows all too well the accusation the Pharisees are making. And so, Jesus returns fire with a series of volleys aimed squarely at his opposition.

a. The prophet: "Your hearts are far from God" (vv. 6-8)

Well, First: Jesus calls upon the Old Testament heavyweight prophet, Isaiah. v. 6.

Jesus' response shows his strategic ingenuity.

Instead of appealing to the Halakha, which makes suggestions about the law,
Instead of appealing to some particular fine point of argument to prove his case,
Jesus goes straight to the Old Testament itself, pulls out Isaiah and rebukes them.

You see, back in Isaiah's time,

Sure, the people of God would turn up for temple every Sunday.
Sure, Israel would go through the motions of giving sacrifices to God.
Sure, they'd sing God's praises with their lips.

And yet, Israel was corrupt to its very core.

City officials were taking bribes,
The poor were robbed of justice
And the rich got away with it.

Israel was morally bankrupt,
and yet spiritually, they'd pay lip service to God.

And Jesus categorically states that the Israel of his day was the one and the same

With the Israel of Isaiah's day.

For the personal pronoun at the start of v. 8

connects the Pharisees with the Israel of Isaiah's time –

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

b. The example: Corban (vv. 9-13)

And in case, the Pharisees have any doubt in their minds, about what Jesus is saying.

Jesus fleshes out the point with the example of Corban. v.9-13:

Jesus sees straight through the spin-doctoring of the Pharisees.

Jesus sees straight through “human traditions” which are allegedly upholding God’s law.

The reality is that the human tradition perverts God’s command.

The reality is that the human tradition circumvents the 5th commandment of God

– honour your father and mother.

“Corban” frees the person from any responsibility towards their parents.

And its’ worse than that.

“Corban” declares that yes,

this object is set aside for God,

but that can occur at some point down the track.

Yes, this item is God’s, but only when he comes to claim it back.

But in the mean time, I’ve abrogated my responsibilities to my parents.

And so, the Pharisees reject the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition.

The brutal truth of Jesus assessment is clear:

The people’s hearts are far, far away from God.

c. The verdict: Coming out vs. Going in (vv. 14-15)

And so, given this reality,
Jesus commands the crowd to “listen and understand”,
The exact opposite of what Israel did to Isaiah,
And the exact opposite of what the Pharisees are doing to Jesus.

The crowd are given the chance to repent.
The crowd are given the opportunity to understand the truth.

And so Jesus makes the broad statement: Food can not defile you.
“There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile,
but the things that come out are what defile”
What goes into a human body, is only and ever will be food going in.
What goes out of a human body, is only and ever will be waste product.
Whatever passes through ta human body, can’t defile you.
And by extension, unclean hands can’t defile you.
Unclean hands and unclean food can’t defile you.

Well, Jesus declares the truth about our insides.
What comes out of our body is what makes us unclean.
And here, Jesus is referring to anything that comes out of the body.
Our thoughts, our speech, our deeds, our motivations.
Everything that emanates out of us, is what makes us unclean.

Rather than minimising the problem.
Rather than rationalizing our heart problem into a justifiable action like Corban.

Jesus blows the lid on the whole thing.
Everything that comes out of us makes us unclean.
Every thought, every word, every deed, every motive makes us unclean.

d. The explanation: From the heart (vv. 17-23)

Well, at this point, the story turns to the disciples.
They have no idea about what Jesus is on about.
So, they ask him in v. 17.

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

Jesus outlines 13 vices to the disciples.
Jesus' explanation is the brutal truth about human nature.
Whatever comes out from our hearts is the problem.
This list of problems are all social problems – the carnage that wreak on each other.

And as we read through the list, we know which ones we are guilty of.
That is, deep down, I think we all know the truth of what Jesus is saying to us.
We know what is in our hearts, and it is very sobering for us.

However, the truth is, v21.

"It is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come"

5. Who is this Man? Jesus vs. our Dorian Grey Culture

Jesus holds the proverbial mirror up in front our souls.
It is this man, who has the guts to hold the mirror up, so we can see who we really are.

And yet, there is also a ray of hope in this passage.
There is also a glimpse of the solution to our heart-problem.

Notice in v. 19, the small statement, in the brackets.
v. 19 – “Thus he declared all foods clean” <<rpt>>

This statement is not just saying that we can eat a hamburger with the lot and not feel guilty.
This statement is not just saying the Pharisees are free to go wild at Sizzlers.

No. This statement is pointing to a much greater reality.

Jesus is declaring the end of purification.
Jesus is declaring the end of religious traditions
Jesus is declaring the end of religion.
There is no more need for Halakha.
There is no more need for the rabbinic traditions.
There is no more need for the stupidity of Corban.

Jesus has come to fix the real problem.
The king has come to fix the problem with our hearts.

We all know where this story ends.
We all know the price it will cost Jesus to fix our hearts.
The pathetic figure, dangling on a hill, outside Jerusalem.
The king who came for the crown of thorns.

And by so doing,
Jesus brought to an end, every foolish attempt to fix our heart problem.
Jesus brought to an end, the futile attempt of using tradition to hide our hearts problem.
Jesus brought to an end, every rationalization we use to hide what lies inside us.
Jesus brought an end to all religion.

Who is this man?
Jesus the man who ends religion
and yet also, Jesus, the man who fixes our heart problem. Amen.