

September 1, 2024 Mark 7:1-8, 14,15, 21-23
A Moment of Clarity

Dallas Willard writes about those bumper stickers that say, “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.”

What the slogan conveys is that forgiveness alone is what Christianity is all about, what is genuinely essential to it. It says that you can have a faith in Christ that brings forgiveness, while in every other respect your life is no different from that of others who have no faith in Christ at all. (Divine Conspiracy, p.36)

Mark is not writing about “just forgiveness” Christianity. Mark is writing about the struggle of Gentile Christians to understand how the rituals of Judaism relate to Christian life. But the point is the same. There isn’t a way to be a follower of Christ that leaves the heart untouched. What is in our hearts will be exposed by our lives, as we realize during moments of clarity that the Holy Spirit gives us. Correct beliefs or rituals are never enough.

Mark was not one of the twelve apostles. Nonetheless, it is thought that he was the first to write a Gospel. As you may have heard, Matthew and Luke seem to use his outline of the life of Christ and each modify it to emphasize what they thought was central. The teaching we are reading today is also in Matthew 15:11. Matthew’s point is that undefiled hands do not defile a person. Mark had gone further, saying that nothing that enters the human body from the outside can make a person unclean, but that what comes out of the body makes a person unclean. This is called the Digestion Parable.

Defilement isn’t really the challenge for Mark or for his first readers and hearers, or for us. The basic problem is holiness. As in, we’re not holy. Those who believe in Christ are promised that springs of living water will flow from their belly. (John 7:38) Mark says that evil inclinations flow out of the heart of human beings, resulting in a catalog of evil behavior. These lists are standard for the day, beginning with six plural acts, then six singular sins.

The church that Mark was a part of seems to have been mixed Gentile and Jewish. Mark often explains Jewish customs as if his readers might not know about them. It was a real problem to determine whether circumcision was required of all who believed in Christ, not to mention the food restrictions of the Old Testament, and the further dietary regulations that sacred tradition had added to them needed to be extended to the Gentiles. Those who observed the dietary laws couldn’t eat with those who didn’t, yet they needed to share the Lord’s Supper and community love feasts! Mark’s community were addressing the same issues that Peter and Paul address, the same issues that the church struggled with for several hundred years.

What is obedience, what is purity? The Sabbath law has not been rescinded, but we don't observe the Sabbath. We observe the Resurrection Day. Christ said he came to fulfill the law, not destroy it. Christ said that not one jot nor tittle, small parts of Hebrew letters, like crossing our t's and dotting our i's, of the law would pass away. The early church came finally to accept that neither circumcision nor dietary laws had to be followed by Gentiles or Jewish people.

It comes us in blinding clarity, by the grace of God, that the good deeds we are relying on, are completely beside the point and that our hearts are absorbing only in ourselves.

The ceremonial washing of hands is something that a person would do to please God. The evil deeds that Mark lists are all things done against another human. Mark is not going to let us off the hook about being religious without having a changed heart and changed behavior. We should be disoriented and upset when we hear this.

The text from *Isaiah 29:13* that is quoted is about claiming to obey God without actually loving and following God. The words of Jesus seemed to turn people away from the Old Testament law, away from what had been revealed about God, into something different. Drinking blood as in the Lord's Supper is certainly not kosher. Jesus, and Paul, Mark and Peter, are making the claim that human tradition blinded people to God's true call. But how could you be sure? It seemed that Jesus was making a new way. But he was returning to the old way, the original way of obedience to God's will. It takes courage in the Holy Spirit to make that discernment.

Romans 14:14, 15 "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died."

We don't graduate from Old Testament law, dietary and other restrictions. We learn God's views and behave in accordance with God's thinking. **Our behavior toward our fellow humans shows whether we are actually honoring God's Word from our hearts.**

How can we become holy, especially if it isn't through religious duties?

How can we be focused on God when we each have a range of conflicted attitudes and behaviors to the Law, as Mark's church did?

Will evil inclinations ever stop flowing out of our hearts?

Belt-Truth; Breastplate-Righteousness; Shoes-Preparation of the Gospel of Peace;

Shield-Faith; Helmet-Salvation; Sword-Word of God. Eph 6:14-18

Resources

Bratcher, Robert G. and Eugene A. Niida. A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark.
United Bible Societies, 1961.

Marcus, Joel. Mark 8-16. The Anchor Yale Bible Series Vol. 27. Yale, 2000. Pp. 439-461.

Willard, Dallas. The Divine Conspiracy. HarperOne, 1997.