

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Notice when you are telling this story that a major section is a comment by the storyteller directly to the audience explaining Jewish customs. This has been an area of controversy in the interpretation of Mark. The general assumption is that this is a sign that Mark is writing for Gentile readers. I think it is a way of including Gentiles in the potential audiences of the Gospel so that they will not be confused about the dispute going on between Jesus and Pharisees. They were not necessarily the dominant group in the audience, but Mark is actively seeking to include them. Therefore, when telling this story use a tone of inclusion and of welcoming various people into its hearing.

Another issue is how to present the words of the Pharisees. I suggest that you present them very sympathetically. That is, present them on the assumption that the listeners can identify with them and that they have those same questions.

Now the questions in regard to the dietary laws and the washing of hands are very interesting because we have largely adopted Jewish practice in the ancient world in our customs now in regard to washing our hands and washing food and washing pots and pans. We have confirmed that this is good hygiene and that people are healthier and do not get as many diseases if they wash their hands and wash their dishes and their pots, which was not the general custom in the ancient world. So there's a way in which Jewish custom and tradition anticipates the developments in modern cleanliness.

However, what also accompanied it was a series of very restrictive laws in regard to what made people unclean. If you know anything about kosher law, it is a very highly restrictive in relation to the height of the sinks in the kitchen, how you handle animals' blood, all manner of things in relation to butcher shops and how they are conducted and how the preparation of food goes on in the house. This was one of the major things that separated Jews from Gentiles in the ancient world and to a significant degree for those who observe those practices today now. The purity laws dealt with both how food was fixed but also what food could be eaten. For example, Jews did not eat any pork nor did they eat certain kinds of seafood and regarded that as being unclean.

Jesus advocates what has become the dominant practice in Christianity. All foods are clean and there is no food that in and of itself defiles a person or makes them unclean or impure; rather, it is what comes out of a person. That's what needs to be paid attention to. In this case Jesus then criticizes the Pharisees, his dialogue partners, strongly for their being adamant about certain dietary laws but not being concerned about other things that are of far greater importance in relation to the law and the commandments of God.

The conclusion of this short story, which is a much shorter version of Mark's story, is an address by Jesus to the crowd. The focus of his attention is on the intentions of the heart.

It is there that one finds the origins of evil, not in the foods that one might eat. This list of the potential sins of people is a list that encourages people to examine their interior intentions. That is where evil things come from. Jesus' teaching here is urgent about needing to pay attention to what's going on in your heart.

In every age the religious community is tempted to substitute abstinence from certain food or drink as the definition of righteousness. In telling the story, the storyteller as Jesus is addressing the gathered community as the crowd of Jews. The tone is pastoral and quiet, a rabbi who is helping his listeners discern the ways of righteousness.