

**12.13.09 / Mark 7:1-23**

This section is a very rabbinical section, involving the sort of dispute that was probably happening in hundreds of locations across the Jewish world every day about how the Law was to be followed. It is important that we see it in this light – that Jesus is a Jewish rabbi, a perfect Jewish rabbi, the God of the Jews as Jewish rabbi, but as a rabbi answering a real and important question for his people at that time.

**What did it mean for those who first heard it?**

It is worth noting a number of things in this passage. First, the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, who denounced him in Chapter 3, are apparently still coming to Jesus and at the very least making trouble. They are not a friendly audience.

The traditions of the elders referenced next are potentially very old. Some of them may be as old as some of the later Old Testament books, coming out of the Exile and ideas about how to remain Jewish in a pagan land. Key to the whole idea, though, is the Pharisees' basic idea about the Law. The overview document covers this in some depth, but essentially the idea was to "build a fence around the Law". That is to add guards to the Law to make it so that it would be almost impossible to actually violate the Law, because you would stay so far away from the actual prohibitions. We know that one of the main focuses of the Pharisees was ritual washing, some of which might be anti-Gentile in nature (for instance, the refusal to eat with Gentiles may be connected with washing after visiting the market, where all sorts of people might be). This sort of ritual was both an obvious add-on to the Old Testament, and expensive. Water must be carried from the source, and a poor family could not spare the time to drag vast quantities of water up from the nearest source for the purpose of washing every utensil and even the couches that many people ate lying on. This allowed the ritual washing to become a class-based status symbol. One could literally afford to be more holy before God than a poorer man.

Jesus' comment is a proper rabbinical retort. He cites Isaiah 29:13, which discusses how the people have moved away from God and their only reverence is for the commands of people that God will again do wonders. The framing comments Jesus adds to this are important. First he says what amounts to "this is you". You might claim to be in the tradition of the elders, but when we look back at history you look more like the people the great prophet Isaiah railed against centuries ago. You haven't learned a thing from the real elders. Second, he ends with a direct accusation. This tradition does not safeguard the Law, rather it helps the Pharisees to break the Law. The whole point of the Pharisees' rigor is the keeping of Law, but they don't do it well or right. Jesus then proceeds to explain how.

Jesus quotes from three books of the Law (Exodus 20:12 and 21:27, Leviticus 20:9, and Deuteronomy 5:16) in slight paraphrase to establish the commands of Moses. He then references a Jewish custom known as "corban". This allowed a person to devote an item to God's service. Specifically, in this case, the item appears to be in the person's possession. Perhaps it is declared corban but they have not yet had time to make the rather long trip to the Temple in Jerusalem to drop it off. Normally a child would be expected, in that society, to give up anything and everything to support their parents if they fell upon hard times. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law are apparently allowing a person to claim that if their parents are in need items that are corban are off limits. Jesus points out that this clearly breaks the Law, which he restates as "the word of God", thereby emphasizing the difference in the authority of the source.

What is happening here? Jesus is laying out a framework, from the Old Testament, for understanding the Law not as a list of rules but as something with a purpose. The ceremonial Law, which he is ignoring, is subservient to

the merciful aspects of the Law. It is always easier to make a checklist for God that says that the people writing the checklist are great than it is to study the demands of God and discover that we aren't the sort of people who actually would want to do these things. This, essentially, is what Jesus is accusing the Pharisees of, of using God's Law not to refine their hearts but to climb social ladders.

Jesus then expands his attack on basic ideas of how the Law functions even further. Traditionally, Judaism sees uncleanness as transmissible, and cleanliness as something to be guarded. One can defile an item fairly easily. Almost nothing, though, has the power to sanctify it. Jesus makes a fairly simple case: it's not the world out to get you that makes you unclean, it's you. The things you eat, he says, go in and back out. These things can't possibly stick with you, but the things that are coming out of your heart most certainly do.

Part of this speech, notably, is made to the crowd. It's a very public rebuttal of the Pharisees, and emphasizes the driving point of the earlier dialogue. The Law doesn't ask you to check off a list (as an example, what legal action does one take to enforce the commandment against coveting?) but to be a merciful, just, holy, and righteous person. Within the Judaism of Jesus' day, and in the legalism many of us have found from time to time today, these regulations have become ways to mark some people as better than others.

Some starter questions:

- 1) Why are the scribes and Pharisees asking this question?
- 2) In terms of Jesus' response, what does His language, use of Scripture, attitude, reasoning, or anything else in this response tell us about what He thinks is most important?
- 3) What is the point of the Law for Jesus, in this passage?
- 4) How, if at all, does it matter that Jesus has done a few Moses-like miracles before talking about the Law?
- 5) What kind of a case does Jesus make about cleanliness?