

The Gospel of Mark

(Mid-Week Bible Study)

Week 10: True Purity and Genuine Faith -- Mark 7:1–37

Picture the Pharisees and the scribes from Jerusalem standing in a knot, watching Jesus' disciples eat. They have come a long way for this. Their accusation, when it comes, sounds almost mundane. "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (7:5). They are not talking about hygiene. They are talking about ritual. The Pharisees had built an elaborate system of hand-washings and dish-washings over the centuries, beyond anything Moses had commanded, to maintain ceremonial purity. The disciples were eating bread without going through the ritual. The dispute is small and absolutely serious.

Jesus does not negotiate the question on their terms. He answers with a quote from Isaiah 29 and an accusation of His own. "You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men" (7:8). Then He gives them a particular example. The practice of 'Corban,' a religious vow that conveniently allowed a person to declare resources off-limits to their aging parents while keeping the resources for themselves, all in the name of devotion to God. The tradition of the elders had become a tool for sidestepping the command to honor father and mother. Jesus calls it what it is. "Thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down" (7:13).

Then He turns to the crowd and reframes the whole conversation. "Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him" (7:14–15). It is one of the most clarifying statements in the Gospel. The defilement problem is not on the outside. It is on the inside. The list He gives a few verses later (evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness) is the running commentary on every human heart.

And then, in a striking turn, Jesus crosses into Gentile territory again. A Syrophenician woman with a demonized daughter falls at His feet. He tests her with words that sound harsh, and her faith answers with humility and persistence. He drives the demon out of her daughter at a word. Back in the Decapolis, He puts His fingers in a deaf man's ears, touches the man's tongue, looks up to heaven, sighs, and speaks one Aramaic word: "Ephphatha" ("Be opened"). Mark 7 is about what true purity actually is, where true defilement actually comes from, and what kind of faith Jesus actually receives. It is also a chapter that will ask each of us where Christ wants to speak "be opened" in our own lives this week.

Group Discussion: The Pharisees were not bad people in any obvious sense. They were religious, careful, and devoted to their interpretation of the law. Yet Jesus accuses them of holding “the tradition of men” above “the commandment of God” (7:8). Where do you see this same pattern still at work in religious life today, in our culture broadly, in long-established congregations, or in our own private convictions, and what helps a believer or a church recognize when a tradition has begun to crowd out the actual Word of God?

Personal Reflection: Jesus said that what truly defiles a person is what comes out of the heart, not what goes in. As you read the list of evils in Mark 7:21–22 (evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness), which one most uncomfortably names something already at work inside you, and what would honest confession and concrete repentance in that area look like this week?

Read Mark 7:1–37

Study Questions

1. When the Pharisees accuse Jesus’ disciples of breaking “the tradition of the elders” (7:5), Jesus answers, “You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men” (7:8). He then gives the example of ‘Corban’ (vv. 9–13), a tradition that effectively let people sidestep the command to honor father and mother. What is Jesus teaching about the proper relationship between human tradition and the Word of God, and what is the warning here for any church or believer in any century?
2. Most of us carry some traditions that are dear to us. Some are helpful. Some are neutral. Some quietly compete with the Word of God for first place in our convictions. Where might you have allowed a personal tradition, a family practice, a denominational habit, or a deeply held assumption to crowd out the actual teaching of Scripture, and what would it look like to bring it back under the authority of the Word?
3. After His confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus tells the crowd, “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him” (7:14–15). What is Jesus teaching about the source and nature of sin, and how does this both correct the Pharisees’ externalism and prepare us to understand why we need an inner work of God, not just outward religion?
4. The list Jesus gives in 7:21–22 is uncomfortably specific. Evil thoughts. Sexual immorality. Theft. Murder. Adultery. Coveting. Wickedness. Deceit. Sensuality. Envy. Slander. Pride. Foolishness. Without rushing past it, name the one or two on this list that most accurately describe something already living in your own heart, and what concrete repentance might look like for you this week.
5. Mark records, almost in passing, the explanatory comment, “Thus he declared all foods clean” (7:19). Connecting this with Acts 10:9–16, 1 Timothy 4:1–5, Colossians 2:13–17, and Hebrews 8–10, what is being taught about the Old Law’s ceremonial regulations (food, festivals, Sabbaths) being fulfilled in Christ, and what is the difference between the

ceremonial law that has been set aside in Christ and moral teaching that continues in the New Covenant?

6. Even believers who would never call themselves legalists often try to earn God's favor by external religious activity rather than walking in the inner work He alone can do. Where in your own life do you tend to rely on outward markers (attendance, knowledge, position, generosity, visible service) to feel secure with God, and what would it look like to receive from Christ the inner change He actually wants to give you?
7. A Syrophenician woman, a Gentile, falls at Jesus' feet and begs Him to cast a demon out of her daughter (7:24–26). His initial answer sounds severe, but she persists in humility, accepting that the children must be fed first while still asking for the crumbs (vv. 27–28). Jesus answers, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter" (7:29). What is Mark teaching us about the nature of saving faith, the breadth of the gospel offer to Jew and Gentile alike, and the welcome Jesus gives to those who come without claim?
8. Where in your own walk with Christ are you tempted to come with a list of claims (your years in the church, your knowledge, your service, your good behavior) rather than with the empty-handed humility of the Syrophenician woman, and what would it look like, this week, to come to Christ honestly as one who can claim only His mercy?
9. Mark 7:21–23 is one of the clearest New Testament statements about the source and nature of human sin. Bring this passage into conversation with Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 3:9–23, Ezekiel 36:26, and Acts 2:38. What does Scripture teach about the corruption of the human heart, the fact that this corruption arises from our own choices rather than from a Calvinistic inheritance of total inability, and the inner cleansing and renewal of the heart that Christ accomplishes through the gospel response of faith, repentance, confession, and baptism into Him?
10. At the end of the chapter Jesus puts His fingers in a deaf man's ears, touches his tongue, looks up to heaven, sighs, and says, "Ephphatha," "Be opened" (7:31–35). As you close this lesson, where do you most need Christ to say "be opened" in your own life (an area of your hearing of His Word, your speech, a long-closed relationship, a place where your heart has shut down), and what one specific act of obedience would put you in front of Him to receive that opening this week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 29:13, the warning against drawing near with the lips while the heart is far away; Jeremiah 17:9–10, the deceitfulness of the human heart and the Lord's ability to search it; Ezekiel 36:25–27, God's promise to give a new heart and a new spirit; Colossians 2:13–17, the Old Law's shadows set aside in Christ, who is the substance; Acts 10:9–16, Peter's vision and the declaration that what God has cleansed is not common.