

Bible Study Guide: Week of 8-23-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

7Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

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Here we leave the Gospel of John chapter 6, where we have been focused for six weeks, and we turn our attention back to the Gospel of Mark. As a result, this week’s reading may be a somewhat jarring tone and theme shift from the last month and a half. The theme of this verse is that of purity vs. impurity. We don’t have sufficient time or space in this study to explore all the intricacies of Jewish purity laws. Such an overview would, no doubt, be helpful to have for those of us unfamiliar with these customs. This also seems to have been the case for Mark’s audience, as well. Why else would Mark spend two verses explaining Jewish purity customs unless he were writing to a largely Gentile audience who were, presumably, unfamiliar with such practices?

This idea of handwashing is quite different from our modern notions about physical cleanliness. Although the ancients would certainly have been aware of dirt and the concept of being physically dirty, the concern that undergirded the purity rituals described here was less about physical dirt and more about ritual purity. Or, perhaps better said, the act of washing away physical dirt from the hands prior to eating was symbolic or representative of the spiritual cleansing God alone can provide. The washing of hands, foods, and vessels prior to eating were seen as acts of devotion and of setting apart the gifts of God to particular use. To fail to do so could be construed as a failure to honor God.

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One could sympathize with the Pharisees and scribes here. How often do we confuse “human precepts” for “doctrines?” For instance, in my previous parish, a member was once asked by a former pastor to go up into the chancel above the altar to dust and clean during a spring clean-up in the church. The member flatly refused, shocked that the pastor would ask her—a lay person—to enter the “holy of holies.” Nowhere in Scripture does it say that in Christian churches only the clergy can enter the area around the altar. In fact, nowhere in Scripture does it say that Christian churches should have an altar at all! A few passages that talk about the supremacy of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in fact hint at the contrary—perhaps we don’t need altars anymore. But I digress. The point is at some point my member had been taught that only pastors could enter a certain area of the church. Was this a doctrine or a human precept? Imagine how scandalized this member was that the pastor (of all people!) asked her to go into the chancel to clean. Blasphemy! You take my point. And we can likely think of other similar “rules and regulations” that we keep because “we’ve always done it that way.” Yet we often assume that we are disobeying the will of God if we dare to buck these traditions in the slightest.

This is the first of many instances, I suspect, in which Jesus’ disciples were accused of breaking the sacred customs of the Jewish people because of their following Jesus. We know, for instance, there was significant strain in the early church over the question of Gentile involvement in the church. Would Gentiles have to become Jewish in order to be members of the church? It sounds strange to our ears, but this was one of the burning questions the first century church had to wrestle with. They ultimately decided that Gentiles need not be faithful Jews in order to be believers in Jesus. This was by no means a foregone conclusion and the fact that it was decided the way it was is why all of these questions of customs and rituals and doctrines and commandments sounds so strange to our ears—most (if not all of us) are gentile Christians in large part because of these actions, decisions, and discernments of the early church.

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Here Jesus expounds upon his earlier teaching, focusing his point on the behavior of the Pharisees. In essence, Jesus says, “don’t talk to me about having clean hands when your hearts are dirty.” His insistence that “nothing that goes into a person can defile” would have sounded radical to practicing Jews—after all, the whole book of Leviticus deals with purity laws. In large part, the focus there is on what is outside of the body that can make the body ritually unclean. Here, Jesus seems to say the opposite. His point is not so much to dismiss or reject the law—on the contrary, he is concerned with the more important point that one’s outer displays of piety can be a poor reflection of one’s true inner being. Better to have dirty hands and a clean heart than the other way around.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. What “human precepts” can you think of that we often follow as if they were commandments of God?**
- 2. What rituals do we do even today that symbolize our inward piety and holiness?**
- 3. Which of the “evil intentions” Jesus mentions in vs. 21-22 do you struggle with the most? Why do you think this is?**