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Mark 7:1-23 That Which Defiles

**Discussion:** Which lifestyle traditions or habits have you let go of? Are there any traditions which 'bind' us that could affect our ability to respond to God's call?

Mark 7	Matthew 15
<p><b>That Which Defiles</b>                      The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus <b>2</b> and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. <b>3</b> (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. <b>4</b> When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) <b>5</b> So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?"</p>	<p><b>That Which Defiles</b>                      Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem                       and asked, <b>2</b> "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" <b>3</b> Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"</p>
<p><b>6</b> He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:  <i>"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. <b>7</b> They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."</i> (Is. 29:13)  <b>8</b> You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." <b>9</b> And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"</p>	
<p><b>10</b> For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' <b>11</b> But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— <b>12</b> then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. <b>13</b> Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."</p>	<p><b>4</b> For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' <b>5</b> But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' <b>6</b> they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.</p>

## Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

	<p><b>7</b> You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:</p> <p><b>8</b> <i>“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.</i></p> <p><b>9</b> <i>They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”</i></p>
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### Comparison

- This scene occurs only in Mark and Matthew (while a variation on this appears in Luke 11:37-54). It is the longest **controversy** scene in Mark's Gospel.<sup>1</sup>
- Both Synoptics describe a delegation of Pharisees and teachers of the law (scribes) who have come 90 miles from Jerusalem, probably to investigate reports about Jesus.
- They demand to know why the disciples are not upholding *the Traditions of the Elders*, and cite a lack of ritual hand-washing as evidence. They assert that the food eaten by the disciples is therefore “defiled” and consequently so are the disciples themselves. Jesus is challenged as he is held responsible for the activity of his followers.<sup>2</sup>
- As Mark was writing to a Gentile (Roman-Christian) audience with little knowledge of Jewish practises, he parenthetically added further explanation, while Matthew's audience would have known this detail.<sup>3</sup> In Mark's account, the Pharisees add that *all Jews do this*.<sup>4</sup> This is ‘overstating’ and was probably more to inform Mark's audience.
- After this point, Matthew includes the same text as Mark but presents it in a different sequence, and Mark provides two additional verses (**v8-9**) to make his argument.
- The sequence followed in each Gospel is as follows:

Mark	Matthew
Accusation of hypocrisy and <b>6-7</b> Citation from Isaiah	<b>4</b> Fifth Commandment (Exod. 20:12) and Death Penalty (Deut. 5:16)
<b>8-9</b> Not following God's commands	
<b>10</b> Fifth Commandment (Exod. 20:12) and Death Penalty (Deut. 5:16)	<b>5-6</b> Illustration of <i>Corban</i> .
<b>11-13</b> Illustration of <i>Corban</i> .	Accusation of hypocrisy and <b>7-9</b> Citation from Isaiah

Some commentators suggest that, in presenting his argument, Matthew's ordering emphasises first the Torah and then the Prophets, a sequence more fitting for his Jewish readers.<sup>5</sup> *To Honour Thy Father and Mother* is the fifth of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:12), the other quote from the prophet Isaiah (29:13).

### Context

- The Pharisees and scribes had a primary motivation of maintaining a Jewish distinctiveness as “*God’s Chosen People*” because, unlike Jerusalem (which was predominantly Jewish in culture and religion), the Jewish communities of Galilee were located within a wider Hellenistic and pagan society.<sup>6</sup> During the Second Temple period, Judaism’s encounter with the surrounding Gentile culture increased significantly. The Pharisees introduced many further traditions such as ritual cleanliness in order to visibly distinguish the Jews from their Gentile neighbours.<sup>7,8</sup>
- The Torah was accompanied by an evolving Oral Law (designed to uphold the Torah) and referred to here as the *Traditions of the Elders*. It would later be codified (AD 200) to become the Mishnah<sup>9</sup>, twenty-five per cent of which related to questions of purity.<sup>10</sup> If the Torah said *what* the law was, the Oral law explained *how* to apply it.<sup>11</sup> The Pharisees gave the Torah and Oral Law equal weight, while the Sadducees adhered only to the Torah.<sup>12</sup> Jesus was challenging their use of Oral Law *over* the Torah.
- This was not about issues of hygiene, but of ritualistic cleanliness.<sup>13</sup> The practice of ceremonially washing hands clearly existed in Jesus’ day but was not commanded by the Torah.<sup>14</sup> Temple priests had originally done this prior to offering a sacrifice (Exod. 30:19, 40:12) but it was extended to private Jewish homes by the time of Jesus.<sup>15</sup>
- The reference to the marketplace is unclear but could imply that simply mixing with non-Jews was sufficient to make a Jewish person unclean.<sup>16</sup>
- The term *Corban* describes a gift (typically money) that had been dedicated and reserved for God, including leaving something in a will at death. This vow was binding.<sup>17</sup> It was occasionally used not for the purpose of vowing something to God, but instead to deprive another person from having it.<sup>18</sup>

### Key Points

- Jesus used Corban as his example of a *Tradition of the Elders* that actually nullified the Law instead of protecting it. Elderly parents, whom the Torah commands had to be honoured, could instead be disenfranchised by this gifting. It was a false piety, and any tradition that did not follow God’s law was worthless.<sup>19</sup> Jesus said that they were not doing God’s will, but adhering to the traditions *of men*, so their worship was empty.

## Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

- This is the only place in Mark's Gospel where Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites, whereas Matthew has Jesus saying this of them thirteen times and Luke three.<sup>20</sup>
- Jesus was using irony, saying how "well" or "beautifully managed" they had crafted a very effective nullification of God's command.<sup>21</sup> It was as if the law of God has become a hindrance.<sup>22</sup> The tradition of Corban actually forbade people from keeping God's law.<sup>23</sup> The misuse of it led to the practise being rescinded by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> And Jesus said to them, this was only one example! Consequently, the *Traditions of the Elders* were only traditions of men, and were therefore not binding.<sup>25</sup> The Pharisees understood the Oral Law to be something developed over time by honoured Jewish teachers of the Law, and yet now apparently dismissed by Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

Mark 7	Matthew 15
<p><b>14</b> Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. <b>15</b> Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."</p>	<p><b>10</b> Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. <b>11</b> What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them."</p>
<p>[16]</p>	<p><b>12</b> Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"  <b>13</b> He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. <b>14</b> Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."</p>
<p><b>17</b> After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. <b>18</b> "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? <b>19</b> For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body."</p>	<p><b>15</b> Peter said, "Explain the parable to us." <b>16</b> "Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. <b>17</b> "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?"</p>
<p>(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)</p>	
<p><b>20</b> He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. <b>21</b> For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, <b>22</b> adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <b>23</b> All these evils come from inside and defile a person."</p>	<p><b>18</b> But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. <b>19</b> For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. <b>20</b> These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them."</p>

### Comparison

- In the second part of this scene, Jesus clarified (in both Mark and Matthew) that what defiles a person is not that which *goes into* them, but that which *comes out* of a person's heart.
- Matthew adds that Jesus was not concerned that his words might offend the Pharisees.
- Mark 7:16 does not appear in all ancient Greek texts, so it is omitted from many Bible translations. This verse simply repeats here the words seen earlier in this Gospel  
*"If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear"* ( Mark 4:23).
- Both accounts show the disciples asking Jesus for an explanation of his words, and in response, Jesus calls them "dull".
- Before presenting a similar list of things that defile a person, Mark parenthetically adds that Jesus has declared all foods clean!<sup>27</sup> This clarifies for Mark's original audience that followers of Christ did not need to adhere to these food laws.<sup>28</sup>

### Context

- Jewish law (Lev 11:1-47) prohibited certain animal foods from being eaten, plus shellfish and some birds. Those that were permitted needed to be slaughtered in a particular way, and the blood drained.

### Key Points

- Years later, the apostle Peter was still conforming to these food laws until he was finally given a vision from God (Acts 10:14-15, Rom. 14:14, 20) that no food was unclean, implying that neither were Gentiles considered *unclean* – all are welcome!
- Jesus turned on its head the argument presented by the Pharisees. By declaring all foods clean, Jesus was saying that neither the external condition of the person *nor the food itself* had the potential to defile a person. Cultic rituals were of no use, and consequently, all food laws were *optional*, not obligatory.
- Jesus was questioning the source of any defilement in a person.<sup>29</sup> He argued that the ultimate purity was a matter of the heart.<sup>30</sup> Uncleanliness comes only from within.

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- When Jesus took them aside, the disciples seemed only to understand as much as the rest of the crowd, regardless of their privileged position with Jesus. They were “dull”, and he appeared irritated that they understood neither his miracles nor his teaching.<sup>31</sup>
- The slight variation between Mark's and Matthew's list of those things that defile is partly explained by Matthew's use of the Hebrew OT while Mark quoted from the Greek translation (the Septuagint, approximately 250 BC).<sup>32</sup> Of the kinds of defilement noted, there are six *acts* of evil listed followed by six *vices* or *moral defects*, although Matthew's list is shorter. Most of these acts or vices are self-explanatory. The six *acts* are sexual immorality (any sexual activity outside the institution of marriage), theft, murder, adultery, and acts originating in greed or malice. The six *vices* are deceit (that which comes from cunning and treachery), lewdness or indecent behaviour, enviousness and jealousy, slander of others, arrogance and folly (the wicked and the foolish are often bracketed together and it represents people who do not know how to behave properly).<sup>33,34</sup>

**Discussion:** As we examine that list of acts and vices that are contrary to God's plan for our lives, what should our Christian response be to:

- our own behaviours or morality if we fall short?
- any of these we observe in our fellow 'practising' Christians? Is Matt. 18:15-17 any help to us?