

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 11 January 2009

No. T0555

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God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: Mark 7

In chapter 7, Mark writes about three different encounters Jesus had with people. First He encountered the Pharisees and the scribes; next He was confronted by a distressed woman whose daughter was demon-possessed; and finally he met up with a deaf mute in Decapolis. We shall talk about each under the headings:

- Dirty hands, Defilement and Deceit verses 1-23
- Demon-possessed Daughter verses 24-30
- Deafness and Dumbness verses 31-37

Dirty hands, Defilement and Deceit

Throughout His ministry, the Lord Jesus was hounded by the scribes and the Pharisees. Verse 1 states that they came as a delegation from Jerusalem, no doubt sent by their religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, on a fault-finding mission. They got an opportunity when they observed some of the disciples eating food without first washing their hands. These strictly religious Jews had embellished the Law of Moses so much that dirty hands equated to defilement! They condemned the disciples as unclean! However, the main thrust of their accusation was that the disciples hadn't followed the traditions passed down by the Jewish elders. For the benefit of his Roman readers, Mark explains in verses 3-4 what these traditions entailed: "For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches" (English Standard Version).

Confronting the Master, the Pharisees and scribes asked: "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" The Lord revealed the deceit of their hearts in His reply: "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honours Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men", verses 6-8. Jesus asserted that they were merely play-acting at religion. They were deceiving themselves, as well as others. But there were more serious failings with regard to these traditions than the triviality of elaborate hand washing ceremonies. As Jesus continued His answer, He accused them of discarding the plain statements of the law in order to pursue these traditions. In verse 9, He said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!" He went on to focus on how these teachings had been cleverly developed to avoid any moral obligations to the elderly. If the Jews converted any welfare resource funds required for their parents in old age into a Corban, that is a gift to God, the elders ruled that the family could disregard the requirements of the Law of Moses. He said that this was one of many shameful examples where their traditions had made the word of God ineffective in terms of pure religion!

At this point in the talk, we must ask questions of ourselves, about our practice of Christianity:

- What aspects of our Christian behaviour, whether in our churches or as individuals, are only for outward religious show or ceremonial effect?
- What kind of 'Christian' (in inverted commas) traditions do we adhere to?
- Do any of these contradict the straightforward teaching or commands of the Word of God?

For myself, I still remember being shocked when a new believer described the Christian community that I belong to as being "much like the Pharisees". Sober reflection on some of our traditions and practices revealed that he was correct! It hurt even more when I assessed these against the Scriptures – some were indeed contrary to the truths of Christianity! We've had 2,000 years of Christendom, that is, the imposition of man's ideas on the Christian religion. After such a long time, I suspect that most Christian communities have more traditions than they realise; or would want to admit to. Some of these, like the Jewish washing of hands ceremonies, are indeed trivial. But the point now, as then, is that they have no real contribution to piety! (Remember, too, that the sect of the Pharisees commenced as a commendable holiness movement some time before Christ, when the spirituality of the nation Israel was at low ebb.)

Now we all know how important it is to wash your hands before you eat food. But it's hardly necessary to insist that it's much more important to look after the elderly! However, the Lord wasn't interested in ranking Jewish religious practices in terms of godly priorities. He was condemning the whole system that these Jewish traditions taught. Moreover, there was an urgent need for the common people to be made aware of the truth of the situation. "He called to him the multitude again, and said unto them [in a parable], 'Hear Me all of you, and understand: there is nothing from without the man, that going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are those that defile the man. If any man hath ears to hear, let him hear'", verses 14-16 (American Standard Version). Jesus fully explained this parable when the disciples privately questioned Him about this radical public announcement: "Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside [his body] cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?...[It is] what comes out of a person [that] defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person", verses 18-23 (English Standard Version).

In Jesus' day, it wasn't politically correct to criticise the revered traditions of the elders. But they were so ludicrous that Jesus said on another occasion the Pharisees strained at gnats but swallowed camels! Neither is it PC in today's world to draw attention to the total corruptness of the human heart, that "in me good does not dwell", Romans 7:18. But every one of us knows what Jesus said is true. Each human being is defiled in God's sight because of the state of his heart. Each day, the truth of Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can understand it?" is verified by human experience. In Scripture the heart of a person is descriptive of mind, thought and will. It's what a person is and wants: "For as he thinketh within his heart, so is he", Proverbs 23:7 (King James Version). The Lord Jesus hit the nail on the head when He said: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart", Matthew 5:27-28 (English Standard Version).

Are you and I personally convinced and convicted that Jesus is absolutely correct about our hearts? It's so easy to put on appearances to impress other people of our godliness. But "the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart", 1 Samuel 16:7.

This teaching about the sinfulness of man is fundamental to the Christian Gospel. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners", 1 Timothy 1:15, to cleanse those who repent of their sins and cry out to God: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me", Psalm 51:10. Thanks be to God for the Good News that we will be both be made clean and counted righteous in God's sight if we believe that He raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (see Romans 4:25). And thanks be to God that sin will not have dominion over us. We've been set free from sin to serve righteousness (see Romans 6:14 and 18).

In verse 19 Mark makes a significant comment on the answer that Jesus gave to His disciples about what defiles a person. After Jesus explained that food couldn't defile since it enters the stomach not the heart, and that through the digestive system, the good is absorbed whilst the waste is expelled, Mark comments "thus He declared all foods clean". (More modern translations show this comment in brackets.) I find this very helpful as it seems to indicate the great difference between the demands of the old covenant and the provisions of grace. "For the law was given by Moses: but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ", John 1:17. The Gospel brings to an end the "this do and you shall live" era, and provides liberty from all religious bondage. We need to be constantly reminded of the fundamentals of the Christian faith and to follow sound doctrine: "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer", 1 Timothy 4:4-5.

Christians believers are enjoined to stand firm in this liberty, and not to submit again to any yoke of religious slavery because it's for freedom that Christ has set us free (see Galatians 5:1). The apostle Paul explains this more fully in Colossians 2:8-23: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition ... and not according to Christ. For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you [are complete] in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In Him also you were circumcised with a [spiritual] circumcision, by the [cutting off] of Christ [at the cross], having been buried with Him in baptism, [and] also raised with Him through [your] faith in the powerful working of God, who raised Him from the dead...God made [you] alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross ... Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a [religious] festival or ... a [holy day]. These [were] a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ ... These [human precepts and teachings] have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh".

Demon-possessed Daughter

Let's read verses 24-30: "from there He arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet He could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard of Him and came and fell down at His feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syro-Phoenician by birth. And she begged Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered Him, 'Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' And he said to her, 'For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.' And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone".

Verse 24 tells us that Jesus left the regions around Galilee and went into the far north-east, into what we nowadays call Lebanon. He tried to avoid publicity but Mark records "He couldn't be hidden". Wherever Jesus went, He attracted people's attention. Here He ministered to a woman who felt her need of Him because her daughter was possessed by a demon. Her need is reflected in that she fell at Jesus' feet and implored Him to cast out the demon. However, as a Gentile, she had no real claims upon the Messiah. That's why Jesus replied that it was Jews, here called 'the children', who had first access to blessings, 'the bread', which shouldn't be devalued or just 'thrown out' to Gentiles, commonly called dogs by Jews. To us this may seem a peculiar response by the Saviour, but she understood what He meant. She readily acknowledged that she was "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, a stranger to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world", Ephesians 2:12. Her faith gave her to realise that there were "blessing crumbs" even for Gentiles. The Lord recognised, from her response about the dogs under the table, her true humility, and set her daughter free of the demon.

It's probable that the majority of listeners today are Gentiles. In this present era, the Gospel age, we can rejoice that God's grace extends beyond the bounds of Israel. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, presented to the Jew first of all, but now also to the Gentile, (see Romans 10:11-13, 11:32 and 1:16). Also, we rejoice that the Gospel is being preached throughout the entire world, in accordance with the Lord's directive: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses [beginning] in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and [going] to the end of the earth", Acts 1:8. Also we especially rejoice that the Saviour said: "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God", Mark 10:14. Let's emulate this woman's faith and be found at Jesus' feet in prayer for blessing upon children's Gospel work.

It would be unusual to find demon-possessed people in the western, Christianised part of the world. But there continues to be power in the Name of Jesus to deliver any who are under bondage in this way. As we conclude this section of Mark 7, let's remind ourselves of the delivering power of the Gospel: "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery", Hebrews 2:14-15.

Deafness and Dumbness

Verse 37 indicates that the Lord Jesus returned from Tyre and Sidon almost immediately He had helped the Syro-Phoenician mother and daughter. Perhaps this excursion was to foretell of the work that He would commit the disciples to do when, in resurrection, He commanded them: "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned", 16:15-16.

As He came back, He by-passed Galilee and came eastwards to Decapolis, where Legion went to proclaim how much Jesus had done for him, 5:20. Having heard about Jesus' healing abilities, some friends of a deaf man, who also had a speech impediment, brought him to be healed. Jesus performed this healing ministry out of the public eye. The friends had asked the Lord to lay His hands on him. Jesus did more than that and Mark records every detail of it in verses 33-34. The Lord placed His fingers in the man's ears, and He spat before He touched the man's tongue. After looking up to heaven, He sighed and said to the man, "Ephphatha," an Aramaic word meaning "Be opened". The man's ears were opened. Because he heard correctly, and his tongue was released, he spoke plainly, verse 35. In keeping with this Gospel's presentation of Jesus as Jehovah's servant, Mark informs us in verse 36 that Jesus didn't want any mention made of the healing, nor for it to become public. He therefore charged the man and his friends not to tell anyone. But their zeal for Him, due to their astonishment at such wonderful blessing, proved too much for them to contain. The more Jesus asked them to refrain, the more they exclaimed: "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak", verse 37.

There's much spiritual deafness and dumbness, in today's world because: "Every mouth [has been] stopped, and the whole world [is] held accountable to God", Romans 3:19. Earlier verses in Romans 3 catalogue the kind of speaking which charges both Jew and Gentile as being under sin:

- “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.”
- “The venom of asps is under their lips.”
- “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness”, (verses 13-14).

So Paul concludes: “it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one’” (verses 10-12). Again, sin can be traced to the human heart: “How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”, Matthew 12:34.

But Christians have had their ears (and hearts) opened to the truth of the Gospel. Therefore they speak aright and they boast “Jesus has done all things well!” He created everything. He lived upon earth totally to the glory of God. He went about doing good. Grace was poured into His lips. At the cross, He completed the work of redemption. Yes, “He has done all things well”!

Let's finish today with a hymn of praise which takes up this majestic theme “He has done all things well”:

*Now in a song of grateful praise,
To our dear Lord the voice we'll raise;
With all the saints we'll join to tell,
That Jesus hath done all things well.*

*All worlds His glorious power confess;
His wisdom all His works express;
But, oh His love! – what tongue can tell?
For Jesus hath done all things well.*

*And since our souls have known His love,
What mercies has He made us prove;
Mercies which all our praise excel,
For Jesus hath done all things well.*

*And when on that bright day we rise,
And join the anthems of the skies,
In ceaseless song this note shall swell,
That Jesus hath done all things well.*

(S Medley)

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