

Mark Core Study #6

Mark 7:1-23 – What is the Kingdom of God NOT like?

Leader's Preparation

Read the passage over at least three times (perhaps in The Message or NASB versions), noting some of your own initial questions and what you feel might be the main point.

Some time this week, read the parallel passage in Matthew:

- Mt. 15:1-20

Try reading a good commentary by: N.T. Wright or William Lane.

Here are some questions and answers to help you as the leader dig deeper: Remember, these are to help your study, not to give you the leader all the answers. Try answering the questions on your own before reading the answers.

1. Who are the major characters in this passage? What do you know about them from the passage?

This passage mentions both Pharisees and scribes (or experts/teachers of the law) as Jesus' opponents. **The Pharisees** were an unofficial but powerful Jewish pressure group through most of the first centuries BC and AD. Largely lay-led, though including some priests, their aim was to purify Israel through intensified observance of the Jewish law (Torah), developing their own traditions about the precise meaning and application of scripture, their own patterns of prayer and other devotion, and their own calculations of the national hope. Though not all legal experts were Pharisees, most Pharisees were legal experts. **Scribes** were a trained class of writers who performed the task of drawing up contracts for business, marriage, etc. Many scribes would thus be legal experts, and quite possibly Pharisees, though being a scribe was compatible with various political and religious stand points. (Source: N.T. Wright – Mark for Everyone).

Also notice that Mark notes (v. 3) that generally all the Jews at that time were following the ceremonial hand washing custom. This explanation of ceremonial washing is a tip to us that Mark's original audience was primarily Gentile.

2. Jesus is first asked about his adherence to the purity laws. But his first reply doesn't directly address their question. What does Jesus address first?

Jesus first addresses the issue of people obeying human traditions over God's word. Notice he doesn't reject the "tradition of the elders", but distinguishes between the priority of following the commands of God versus human traditions.

Now, one must be cautious not to immediately jump to the picture the 15th c. reformation debate of 'scripture' vs. 'Catholic tradition' when reading this passage.

The debate between Jesus and the Pharisees was between two different ways of understanding what it meant to be a good Jew in the first century. This debate is not so much about doctrine or ethics, but about political agendas. Remember, the Pharisees had gone down the road of believing that they could bring about God's Kingdom by purifying Israel through their own take on intensified observance of Jewish law. Jesus challenges their basis for bringing about purity, and then goes on to answer their question by way of a parable about purity.

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3. What is the charge Jesus makes against the Pharisees and legal experts?

Jesus charges them with teaching human custom as fundamental law. Like a prophet, Jesus rightly judges them as hypocrites, claiming to be teachers of God's truth and law, but in fact only teaching human traditions.

He then goes on to give an example of how these legal experts have come up with a "loop hole" around God's law, which, by declaring their property to belong to God, can be free of all further obligation to their parents. They are hypocrites because God has commanded the duty to parents, and so "officially" giving the money to God actually makes a mockery of the God they are claiming to honour.

4. What is the wider issue Jesus is addressing? What would be the consequences of following the Pharisees program?

The wider issue for Jesus and the Pharisees, is not the relevancy of adherence to human traditions for the sake of purity, but who speaks for God today? Who is offering a way of life which honours the God who spoke through scripture? (Which, by the way, is something Jesus assumes throughout).

Jesus isn't simply challenging the abstract idea of scripture versus tradition, but he is challenging the end result of following the Pharisee's political-religious program that ultimately ends in a revolt against Rome. If the Kingdom was indeed coming in the work and person of Jesus – by healings, by feasting with outcasts, by rolling back the kingdom of darkness – then the way that the layers of Pharisaic tradition had been pointing for long enough was quite simply ruled out from the start. (Source: N.T. Wright – Mark for Everyone).

5. Jesus answers their original question about purity in the form of a parable. Why does Jesus tell parables in public and then explain them in secret?

Jesus is challenging a highly committed political-religious system for which people had been martyred. It was the only way Jesus could tell them in a subtle way that they were heading the wrong way.

6. Similar to last week, Jesus interprets the parable for his disciples in private. Does that interpretation help you understand the point Jesus is making to the Pharisees? Try putting his answer in your own words.

7. Is Jesus saying that only spiritual things matter, only matters of the heart?

It's easy to get off track with what Jesus is saying, and interpret his parable as saying that the external, physical things don't matter; what matters are the internal, spiritual things. But Jesus is not saying that the external and physical things are irrelevant or bad, and the internal or spiritual things are good. He is not saying that if we get in touch with our deepest of feelings, or learn to listen to what our hearts are truly telling us, we will find happiness. He is insisting that good and bad external and physical actions come from internal and spiritual sources, and that the poisoned wells of human motivation are the real problem. It isn't a debate of the physical versus spiritual for Jesus. It is an issue of purity of motives. When we have a crack in our system, it runs all the way through, and keeping physical purity laws are like papering over the cracks.

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INTRODUCTION

Try an ice Breaker and/ or this introductory question before reading the text:

- We just celebrated Thanksgiving. Does your family have any special traditions around the holiday?
- Often in our culture there are negative stereotypes of religious tradition. What are some of your stereotypes?

In this passage Jesus has some pretty harsh words for the Pharisees and the traditions they choose to observe. What is important in understanding and interpreting this passage is that the group members realize what Jesus has to say is much more complex than simply 'human traditions are bad'. This introductory question is intended to begin that conversation, but also to leave the conversation open to seeing what the passage has to say.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the major characters in this passage? What do you know about them?
2. One of the challenges of this passage is that unless you're inside the Jewish 1st century world you won't get the point. But Mark knows his audience is primarily Gentile and provides a few explanations to his readers (v. 3; 11; 19). What do we learn about the current context from these explanations?
3. What specific complaints does Jesus raise against the Pharisees' approach to tradition (7:6-13)?
4. Jesus interprets the parable to his disciples in vv. 20-23. Summarize his interpretation by putting his answer in your own words.

If it's helpful for the size of your Core, break into pairs to answer this question together.

5. How does Jesus' view of becoming "unclean" differ from that of the Pharisees (vv. 14-23)?

RESPONSE:

Summarize what the members of your Core have collectively been learning about this passage

6. In what ways do we sometimes emphasize appearance over internal reality?
- or
7. Jesus interprets the parable to his disciples in vv. 20-23. He says that what makes us impure most often proceeds from our hearts. Garbage in is garbage out. Not that it doesn't work the other way around either, but that true transformation is more than skins deep. What areas in our lives right now are like garbage in and consequently will be garbage out?