

Living the Way of Jesus Week 9

'The Heart of the Matter'

Bible Passage: Mark 7:1-23

The first part of Mark 7 is Jesus' final encounter with the Jewish establishment prior to his reaching out to the largely Gentile (non-Jewish) population who lived in the Decapolis (the Ten Cities area). In these verses Mark explains some of the tradition of the Jewish religious leaders in order to help his readers who have no Jewish background.

The rules to which the Pharisees are referring are an oral tradition given by elders – they are not written in the Torah (the full written Jewish Law). The only biblical mandate for washing can be found in Exodus 30:19; 40:12 which tells us that priests had to wash their hands and feet before going into the Tabernacle. However, ritual washing was a wide-spread practice.

Read Mark 7:1-8

- What do you notice about these traditions?
- Many of the Jewish food laws in the OT are basically public health measures designed to keep people healthy, and to enable them to flourish during their journey in the wilderness. Do you think that the rules outlined here are helpful or not?
- What was the complaint of the Pharisees? (7:5)
- And what was Jesus complaint about them? (7:6-8)

Jesus contrasts the 'commands of God' with 'human traditions'. (7:8)

- Think about today's Church, and brainstorm some of the ways in which we do things that you think follow simply 'human traditions' rather than the 'commands of God'.
- How far do we in church assess what we are doing in accordance with British middle-class values, rather than the principles that God lays out in scripture?
- Think back to a service of worship that you attended recently. How guilty have you been of honouring God with your lips rather than with your heart? (7:7) (Notice here that Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah. All of the OT prophets voiced God's complaint that people's worship did not marry up with the lives that they led. See especially Micah 6.)
- Hypocrisy is not well thought of today. How can Christians avoid being accused of being hypocrites?
- How far is Micah 6:8 a calling for today's Church?
- As individuals, how can we live out Micah 6:8 today?

Read Mark 7:9-13

- How does Jesus expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees? (Corban is a type of free-will offering, and literally means 'to bring near'.)
- How does Jesus explain that he in fact obeys the Torah (the Laws of Moses) while they do not? (See Exodus 20 for the Ten Commandments, which are part of the Torah.)
- Can you think of any ways in which today we 'nullify the word of God by our tradition'? (6:13)
- Why do you think that some people find rules more attractive than radical repentance?
- Jesus was very angry with these people. Why was that, and are we called to be the same?

Read Mark 7:14-22

- Jesus is very clear that inner purity matters so much more than outer appearances. How can we maintain this level of holiness?
- Do we often judge others by the outside rather than the inside?
- Someone once summed up what Jesus is saying here in the phrase, 'the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.' How far do you agree with this? Are people 'all bad'?
- The list given in (7:21-22) is distinctly unattractive. If people are by nature disposed to these things is there any hope for the human race? Is it any use trying to change anything about the world for the better – e.g. the unjust structures of society – if people are always going to do terrible things?
- How do we recognise and deal with these sins in ourselves?

Finally

Take some time to examine your own heart and motives.

Use a prayer of confession and cleansing of your own choice, or a song to help you in this.

Here are two possibilities. They need to be read aloud slowly, so as to give people in the group the time to bring before the Lord the sins and the struggles that are in their own hearts.

Confession 1

Disturb us, O Lord,

when we are too well-pleased with ourselves;

when our dreams have come true

because we have dreamed too little;

because we have sailed too close to the shore.

...

Forgive us, O Lord,
when, with the abundance of things we possess,
we have lost our thirst for the water of life;
when, having fallen in love with time,
we have ceased to dream of eternity;
and in our efforts to build a new earth,
we have allowed our vision of heaven to grow dim.

...

Remind us, O Lord,
when we allow others gods to hold their sway,
and the storms of life overwhelm us;
to put into safe harbour, and remember that
you are our refuge and strength.
Remind us to take time to be still and to know you,

Stir us, O Lord,
to dare more boldly, to venture into wider seas,
where storms show your mastery;
where, losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.

...

In the name of Him who pushed back the horizons of our hopes
and invited the brave to follow.

Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen

Confession 2

We are sinners.

Have mercy on us, O Lord.

Too often have we chosen the fruit over the garden.

...

Too often have we bowed down to the golden calf.

...

Too often have we begged for a sign.

...

Too often have we declared Caesar to be Lord.

...

Too often have we demanded to see the wounds in your hands.

...

Too often have we substituted our image of you, for you.

...

Too often have we neglected your call to be salt and light.

...

Too often have we mutilated the body of Christ to individual parts.

...

Too often have we reduced Christianity to a moral code.

...

Too often have we forgotten Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

...

Too often have we acted on sight and not on faith.

Heal us now of our sinfulness and of the hatred that divides us ...

Take away our hardness of heart ...

Open our eyes which are often blind to the needs of others ...

Remove our selfishness and our greed ...

Give us self-control at all times ...

and fill our hearts with your eternal love.

Jesus, we ask you now to heal us and to bless us,

And to fill us with your peace.

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.