

Bible Study: Mark 7 Unwashed Hands

Author: John Mark, a companion of Paul, Barnabas and Peter

Audience: Traditionally, Christians in Rome

Date: Approximately A.D. 55-68

Location: Traditionally, in Rome

Theme: Jesus, the Son of God

Genre: Gospel/narrative

Outline

The Pharisees criticize the disciples (7:1-5)

Jesus rejects the traditions of the Pharisees (7:6-16)

Jesus explains the true nature of defilement (7:17-23)

Observation

The disciples were eating bread without ritually cleansing their hands (7:2).

They were breaking the traditions of the elders, not God's commandments (7:3).

The Pharisees and scribes had elaborate rituals for cleansing cups, pots and hands (7:4).

Their traditions were more important to them than obeying God's law (7:8).

They effectively neutralized many of God's laws through their traditions (7:9).

A man is not defiled by physical things that pass through his digestive tract (7:18).

A man is (morally) defiled when evil thoughts result in evil deeds (7:20).

Interpretation

What does "purifying all foods" mean (Mark 7:19)?

1. The disciples were breaking the traditions of the elders, not God's commandments:

The ritual washing regulations were observed by the Pharisees and all the Jews (a generalization depicting their custom) as part of the tradition of the elders which they followed scrupulously. These interpretations, designed to regulate every aspect of Jewish life, were considered as binding as the written Law and were passed on to each generation by faithful Law teachers (scribes). Later, in the third century a.d., the oral tradition was collected and codified in the Mishnah which, in turn, provided the foundation for and structure of the Talmud.

The most common ritual cleansing was the washing of one's hands with a handful of water, a formal practice required before eating food (cf. TDNT, s.v. "*katharos*," 3:418-24). This was especially important after a trip to **the marketplace** where a Jew would likely come in contact with an "unclean" Gentile or such things as money or utensils.

The comment that the Jews observed many other traditions, some of which Mark named, indicates that the issue under discussion involved the whole detailed question of ritual cleansing. For a loyal Jew, to disregard these regulations was a sin; to follow them was the essence of goodness and service to God.¹

¹John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 2:132.

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2. God gave His laws to Israel so they could be an example to other nations (Deut 4:5-8); nullifying the food laws would be inconsistent with His original purpose for Israel.
4. Jesus upheld the continuing validity of the Mosaic Law; nullifying the food laws would be inconsistent with His own teaching (Matt 5:17-19, Mark 7:9).
5. According to the Pharisees, unwashed hands were presumed to be unclean (defiled), therefore, eating with ritually unwashed hands transmitted defilement to the bread (*artos*) and to the man (Mark 7:1-2), but Jesus negated their whole line of reasoning (Matt 15:19-20)

Following a solemn call to attentive hearing and careful consideration by **everyone** (cf.4:3), **Jesus** disclosed to **the crowd** the true source of defilement. Negatively, **Nothing outside a man** (generic, “person”) by going into him **can make him “unclean”** (cf. 7:2). Jesus spoke in a moral not a medical sense. A person is *not* defiled morally by what he eats even if his hands are not ceremonially washed.

Positively **What comes out of a man** (person; cf. vv. 21-23) **makes him “unclean.”** A person *is* defiled morally by what he thinks in his heart even though he may scrupulously observe outward purity rituals. So Jesus contradicted the Rabbinic view by stating that sin proceeds from within and not from without (cf. Jer. 17:9-10). He also demonstrated the true spiritual intent of the laws regarding clean and unclean food in the Mosaic Law (cf. Lev. 11; Deut. 14). A Jew who ate “unclean” food was defiled not by the food, but by His disobeying God’s command.²

6. In Mark 7:19, the term “food” (Greek *broma*) refers specifically to biblically clean foods that the Pharisees declared to be defiled (literally, “common”) but Jesus declared to be clean; in this context, the definition of “food” cannot be extended to include unclean meats because they were considered to be intrinsically unclean and prohibited as food items.

Application

An error to avoid: Regarding the Jewish Oral Law as authoritative for Christians.

An error to avoid: Allowing tradition to nullify God’s laws (e.g., the Sabbath).

A verse to memorize: Mark 7:7-8

²John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2:134.