

Tradition and Testimony

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 7)

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Our journey through the Gospel According to Mark continues with chapter 7:

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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.)

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 'unclean' hands?"

He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

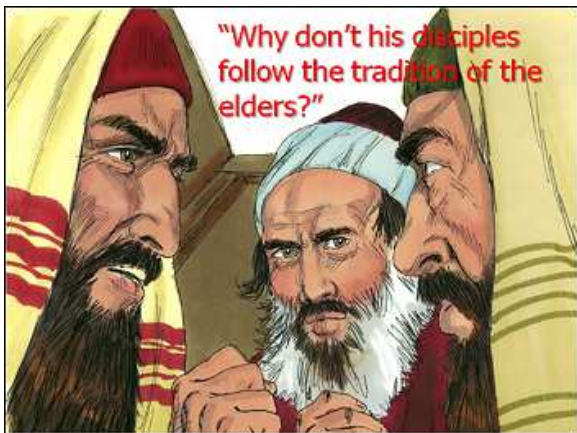
These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

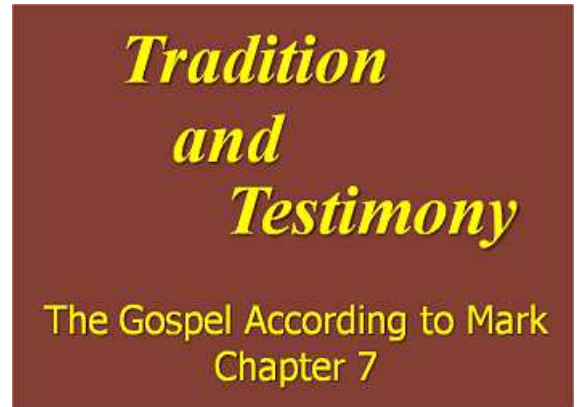
And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that" (7:1-13)

As we've been walking through the Gospel of Mark we've noted several special features of this Gospel. One is the frequent occurrence of Mark's favorite word, *euthus* or "immediately." Using that word gives us a picture of Jesus moving quickly from event to event, as a man of action rather than one of many words. Along with that, Mark tends to abbreviate his narrative of events that the other Gospels relate more fully, so he sometimes leaves out the things Jesus said on particular occasions. Thirdly, we often encounter the "Messianic secret," the idea that Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the Son of God, is kept hidden from most people — although the evil spirits understand well enough who he is. Here in this passage we find another feature of Mark's Gospel, which of course it shares with the other Gospels: the inclusion of "controversy stories," events in which Jesus gets into heated debates with his opponents, especially the Pharisees.



7:12) because it leads ultimately to Jesus the Messiah. So it's not correct to say that Christians can just forget about the Jewish Torah as irrelevant. And it's also not correct to claim that the Pharisees believed in being saved by their "works of the Law." Keeping the Torah was actually a way of responding to the grace God had already shown his people.

Sometimes preachers paint all the Jews the same color, and claim they all believed they had to keep the Law to be saved, or they expected a certain kind of Messiah, and so forth. The real picture had a lot more



color. The Pharisees were only one of several groups within the Judaism of New Testament times. There were the **Sadducees**, the priests who managed the Temple sacrifices and accepted only the Law of Moses, not the Prophets or other writings, so they didn't believe in the resurrection. There were the **Hellenists and Herodians**, who lived a Greek rather than Jewish lifestyle and collaborated with the Roman occupiers who kept them in power. There were the **Zealots**, the revolutionaries who wanted to revolt against Rome. There were the **sectarians**, who saw themselves as the only true Jews and went off to live in separate remote communities; they're the ones who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. There were **the common people** among whom Jesus walked — just ordinary folks trying to get along under difficult circumstances, and ready to hear what Jesus was doing and saying that was revealing the emerging kingdom of God.

Then, there were the **Pharisees** — a term that has become synonymous with judgmental hypocrites. But we need to understand where they were coming from. For centuries the Jews had been in exile, or under foreign domination even in their homeland. Their hope was that God would at last rescue his people and set them free, perhaps through his Messiah. The Pharisees' approach was to encourage the people's faithfulness to the Law of Moses, so God would recognize them as the chosen ones and vindicate them. To make sure they kept the Law to the letter, they erected what they called "a fence around the Torah," various rules and regulations that went beyond what the Law specifically said. The Pharisees weren't hypocritical because they were insincere; they fully believed in what they were doing, even to the point of being fanatics about it. Their traditions were their *testimony* to the calling the Lord had placed on their people.

So why did Jesus call them hypocrites? Because the traditions they developed, supposedly to protect the Law, had the opposite effect. Instead of helping the Jews realize God's purpose in the heart of the Law, they nullified the Law. The Pharisees forgot that the purpose of the Law wasn't to make the Jews a special, super-righteous people. God's purpose in giving the Law was to prepare and equip his people for the mission he had called them to when he promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through them — a mission that came to fulfillment in Jesus. So some of the "fence" the Pharisees built around the Law actually kept the Law from doing what it was supposed to do.



That's what Jesus points out in this debate with the Pharisees. The example he gives has to do with the commandment to honor one's parents. If a Pharisee dedicated his wealth to God — which on the surface sounds like a wonderful thing — then he wasn't obligated to use his resources to help his ageing parents (and remember, this was long before Social Security, Medicare, or retirement plans). So Jesus tells them, "You invalidate God's word through this tradition which you hand on." And he quotes from Isaiah to make the point: You're pretending to honor the Lord, but you're really following rules you've made up yourselves and are imposing them on others.

In evangelical Christian circles "tradition" has a bad name, and that's partly because of this passage from the Gospels in which Jesus scolds the Pharisees for elevating their traditions over the Word of God. I think we all understand that not all traditions are bad; some traditions are important to preserve. For example, when the apostle Paul describes the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, he says, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (1 Corinthians 11:23-24). The four Gospels hadn't been written when Paul wrote that, so when he says "I received this, and I'm passing it on to you," he's talking about a *tradition* — because that's what a tradition is, something passed on from one era to another. And in the Christian churches we have a *tradition* of observing Communion with each worship service, because that's what we understand took place in the early church. That's a good tradition which, by the way, the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox, and other groups also follow; that tradition is a *testimony* to the authority of Scripture. For various reasons (that might even be good reasons) some churches follow a different tradition such as having Communion the first Sunday of the month.

TRADITION

Evangelicals sometimes dismiss tradition as irrelevant and claim not to be following anything but the Word of God. But every Christian group needs to examine itself to see if it's really following some *tradition* that doesn't have a basis in the Word of God, or which is simply repeating the same thing over and over without thinking it through. For example, there are some standard or traditional understandings of the "end times" and the Second Coming of Jesus that get preached over and over, but don't really have a solid basis in Scripture. (I won't go into any details here.) And in some quarters, whenever a person prays during worship they will end with, "Guide and direct us, and we'll be careful to give you the praise" — which is fine, except it gets repeated over and over as a kind of traditional formula. So let's ask ourselves,

"Is what we're saying or doing in the church really building up the body of Christ, or extending our faithful obedience to the Word of God — or is this just something we do or say without really thinking about it, because it's a tradition and we're used to doing it that way?"

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'"

After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.

"Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")

He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (7:14-23).

In the previous passage, we find the Pharisees questioning why Jesus' disciples don't wash their hands before eating, because the Pharisees had all sorts of traditions about washing their hands, and cooking vessels and the like, that were part of their "fence around the Torah." Now, we would go with the Pharisees in this matter, wouldn't we? It's a good idea to wash your hands before you eat lunch, because modern scientific research has revealed how diseases can be communicated by lack of cleanliness. But let's recall that the Pharisees didn't know about germs, which were discovered by Louis Pasteur in the 1860s. So the Pharisees didn't wash things because of germs; they washed their hands, and other things, especially when returning from a public place like the local market where they might have come into contact with Gentiles.



The scene is Galilee, where Jewish and Gentile communities lived side by side. The whole purpose of the Pharisees' teaching and practice was to strengthen the identification of the Jews as a special people, set apart from these other nations by keeping the Law. So their washings, even if they did contribute to sanitation, weren't for sanitary purposes. They were what we call "ritual washings," special ceremonies to shake off the contamination of contact with "unclean" people who weren't Jews. But Jesus is calling his people back to their original purpose: to bless other nations by bringing them back to their Creator, and thus renewing the good creation that has been spoiled by humanity's rebellion against God. And to symbolize this reaching out to all people, Jesus and his disciples didn't practice these anti-Gentile ritual washings.

Much the same applies to food. The Law of Moses contains dietary regulations, such as not eating pork or shellfish. I think such rules had two purposes. One was health-related, because under conditions of the ancient world eating bottom-feeders, like clams, or pork that might be infected with parasites, could cause serious illness or death. The Israelites would have known about the danger of eating bottom-feeders from having lived in Egypt, next to the Nile, for several centuries. The other reason was a matter of group identity;

avoiding such foods was part of what separated the Israelites from other nations. The first reason might still be valid today; for many years I avoided eating pork because of things I had read about the unhealthy effects of that kind of meat (although more recently I've relaxed that practice somewhat). But the other reason has to do with feeling special or superior because you don't eat what other people eat, and there's no place for that kind of thinking in a person who wants to reach others with the gospel of the kingdom of God. *In that sense*, as Mark notes, "all foods are clean," even if they're not really healthy for you.



Jesus uses this example to make a point: it's not what we eat, or don't eat, that reveals whether we're "clean" before the Lord. It's what comes *out of our mouth* that really shows what's in our hearts. What we *say* with our mouths will eventually determine how we act toward other people. By our words and

actions it becomes clear where we really stand with the Lord. Friends, it's so important to guard our words and avoid negative or careless speech, because *we will get what we say*. If we moan, "I seem to be catching a cold," we may very well get a cold. If we say, "I guess I'm just not good at speaking in public," then we'll be sure to fumble when we have to do that. If we complain, "Nobody treats me right," or "I guess I can't make any friends," then people will just reinforce our own expectations of ourselves. It's what comes out of our mouths — not what goes in — that shapes our success (or lack of success) in being the people God wants us to be. Here's our question: **Can I be more uplifting and positive in my speech, and so reveal the faith in the Lord that's in my heart?**

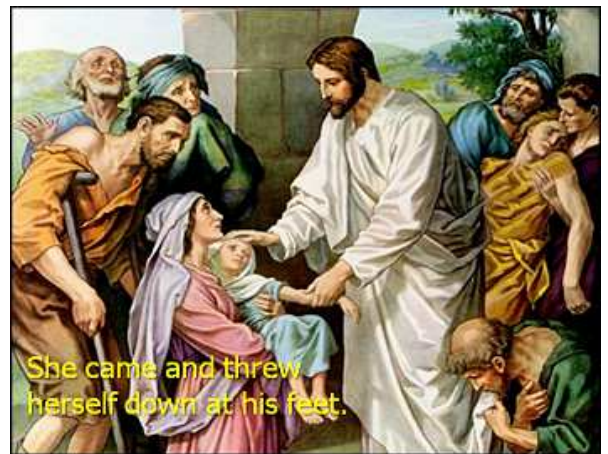
Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone (7:24-30).

Here Mark has taken his narrative out of Galilee and into Gentile territory, the region of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast in what today is Lebanon. We've seen that Jesus wants his good news of the coming kingdom of God to reach people around the world, not just the Jewish people. Word of his "mighty works and wonders and signs" has spread to this place also, and a woman comes asking him to deliver her daughter from an evil spirit that has attacked her. (True to Mark's habit of keeping things brief, the nature of the attack isn't specified.) The woman is a Syrophenician, a member of the local Semitic community, but Mark also calls her a "Greek" because that was her language. Notice that Jesus is able to converse with her, so it's likely that he could speak Greek as well as Aramaic and Hebrew, the languages of the Jews.



We might find Jesus' response to the woman's plea for help rather rude and uncaring: "It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." The children, of course, are the Jews, who sometimes referred to the Gentiles as "dogs." Some people, even church leaders, have called Jesus a racist because of this remark; that just shows how little they understand the real thrust of Jesus' message about the kingdom of God. But why such a seemingly cruel and dismissive reply to this woman? Is Jesus testing the woman's faith? That could be, for his reply doesn't stop her. She comes back with: "Well, Master, even the dogs under the

table eat the crumbs that the children drop." When Jesus sees that this woman is persistent, and is even willing to be thought of as an inferior "dog" if that will get her daughter delivered, he grants her request and her daughter is set free.

But this incident reveals more than this woman's humble faith, and Jesus' response to that faith. Let's repeat what he says to this Gentile woman: "It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." What's "the children's bread"? This woman's not asking for a food handout; what she receives isn't bread, but her daughter's deliverance. "Bread" in the Bible stands for more than the product of the local bakery; it stands for everything that sustains life. It stands for the Word of God, and it stands for the healing and rescue that are the evidence of the kingdom of God at work. When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we're not just asking for something to put on the kitchen table; we're asking for all the benefits of knowing Jesus and living in the kingdom of God: the enlightenment of his Word, the healing of our diseases, the transformation of our relationships, the renewal of our outlook on life, and so much more that points toward the life of the resurrection from the dead.



We've seen that the "children" are the Jews, the people of Israel, so why is this "bread" primarily for them and only after that for others? Think of that phrase the apostle Paul uses three times in Romans, especially at the beginning: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16) — like this Syrophenician woman of Tyre. The good news of God's rule over all things didn't just fall out of the sky as an announcement to humanity in general. No, historically it came to one people through Abraham, whom the Lord called to take his name to the rest of the world.

The gospel of the kingdom isn't some abstract teaching that drops down out of the blue into the twenty-first century, as though it had never been heard before. *The gospel is a story* with a beginning and a goal, and we're part of the story *between the beginning and the goal*. That story began with the people of Israel, but we've been brought into that story through Messiah Jesus — which is what God intended all along when he called Abraham to serve him. If we don't understand that, we don't have a full understanding of God's purpose. The Pharisees couldn't see that, which is why Jesus was so disgusted with them. But this woman of Tyre is willing to see it, and receives the reward for her faith. Let's ask, then, this question: **Can I see myself as part of the larger story of God's unfolding purpose, so I understand it's not all about me — God's purpose was first made known to people in another time and place?**

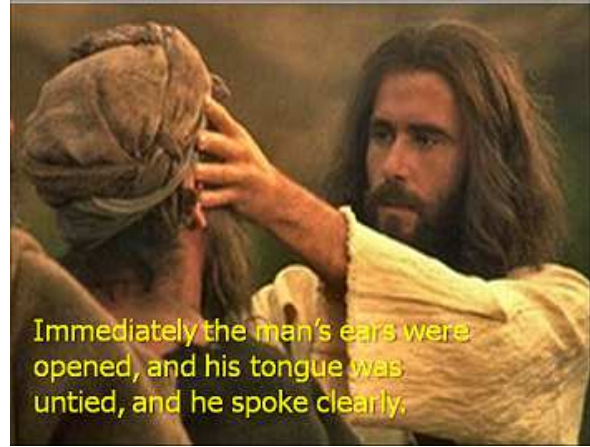
Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.

After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!").

At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" (7:31-37).

Again, Mark records that familiar refrain: "Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them, the more they spread the news." The "mighty works" of Jesus are signs that the kingdom of God is present, and they reveal Jesus as the bringer of the kingdom, the Messiah of Israel. It's still too soon to bring that testimony out into the open. Jesus must continue to preach, and heal, and deliver people while there's still time. Pressure is building from his enemies — those who are threatened by the Lord's return to his people.

The reality of God impacting people's lives always threatens those who claim to be the authorities and experts, as if God could do nothing without their prior approval. We need to be led by the living Holy Spirit, as he quickens the Word of God to our hearts and minds, and not just lapse into traditional or customary ways of doing things because somebody in the past decided they had to be done a certain way. As we said earlier, *tradition is good* if it preserves genuine biblical practices and connects us with the real events of the Lord's history with his people. But a mindless, unexamined tradition can get in the way, and block us from knowing a real connection with the purposes of God. (How did I get on this topic again?)



Let's come back to the healing of the deaf man. Mark's account is based on eyewitness testimony, to the extent that he even records what Jesus did when he healed the man, and the Aramaic words that Jesus spoke. This is a pretty down-to-earth incident; Jesus doesn't just speak some "magical" formula and *presto*, the man is healed. He takes him off privately; he groans; he puts his fingers in his ears, spits, and touches his tongue. There is power flowing through the man Jesus — the power of the Creator God — and that power manifests itself through *direct physical contact*. Through touch, Jesus is communicating to the deaf man his own ability to hear and to speak.

It's still that way today. Jesus isn't with us visibly, in the flesh and blood of a Jewish teacher who walked the land two millennia ago. But he's here in the *flesh and blood* of his followers, who are in Christ and have his Holy Spirit. When we pray for healing, it's important to not just utter holy-sounding, "spiritual" words, but to have *physical contact*: to lay hands on one another, that the virtue of Jesus might flow between us and do its creative work. And Jesus is also here in the emblems of his body and blood, the physical loaf and cup of Holy Communion. As we receive these gifts by faith, the life of the risen Lord Jesus is communicated to us. In this way we become, as Peter says, "partakers of the divine nature," and our healing flows from the presence of the risen Lord. **"Am I ready,"** let's ask ourselves, **"to get close to Jesus through contact with those who have his Holy Spirit, so I can receive the healing of his living presence?"**

So let's review our four questions from Mark, chapter 7:

- Are we doing traditional things in the church, things we're just used to doing, without considering whether they're strengthening our obedience and testimony to the Word of God?
- Can I express my faith in the Lord by being more uplifting and positive in what I say?
- Do I humbly receive the benefits of God's unfolding purpose, knowing that it's not all about me? Do I understand that God's purpose was first revealed to others, and I'm part of that larger story?
- Am I ready to receive Jesus' healing presence through contact with other members of his body who have his Holy Spirit?

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