

Mark 7:1-23

Historical Background for Mark:

Mark is the shortest of all the gospels and considered by most scholars to be the earliest written. The authorship of Mark is highly debated and ultimately unknown. Regardless, tradition has attributed this gospel's writing to John Mark, a companion of Paul and Barnabas, with Roman (Gentile) Christians as the intended audience. It is assumed as a source for both Luke and Matthew. Composed in the common Greek of the time, most scholars date its arrangement not long before the 70 CE destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Literary Nature of Mark:

Mark is commonly thought to be a narrative of Christian discipleship. It is also a story of great action and conflict, making it compelling to read. Mark's overarching theme seems to deal with the question: Who is Jesus? Answered by the author in the first verse, the question is wrested with by the disciples throughout the text, and even confessed by a Roman soldier in the end; "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (15:39).

Context of Mark 7:

Structurally, Mark 7 sits in the midst of Jesus' teachings and healings. Leading up to this chapter, Jesus has been presented as:

God's good news for the world (Messiah, Son of God)

In and amongst common people (tax collectors and sinners)

One with authority over all things (demons, sin, Sabbath, disease, death)

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This text is surrounded by the miracles of Jesus. Chapter 6 shows Jesus feeding the five thousand and walking on water. The latter section of chapter 7 reveal more healings, followed by Chapter 8 with its further healings and crowd feedings.

Mark 7:1-23 is a conflict between Jesus and Jewish leaders. Debating ritual cleansing, this text stands as the prelude to Jesus' ministry to and healing of Gentiles. Ritual hygiene is the topic, but not the point of Jesus' teaching. The Pharisees had assumed their lifestyle and traditional rituals to be the essence of religion and the gauge of orthodoxy to an extent that they even supplanted the Law. Jesus points out that the very traditions intended to produce piety are, in fact, impure when they keep people from following God's Law.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees' question with a parable/riddle, teaching that it is not what is external that makes a person impure, but the internal posture of the heart. Jesus' list of things that make humans unclean is notably comprised of things that stand at odds with loving God and loving neighbor—the inclination of the heart. This redefinition of cleanliness both reiterates Jesus' authority over all things as the Son of God, and opens the door for Jesus' following action as he goes into the Gentile community of Tyre to continue his ministry of healing and teaching to a people marginalized by the Pharisaical tradition.