

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 08/29/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

**Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost**

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, August 29<sup>th</sup>

**Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

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### ***Sola Scriptura or Sola Traditum?***

The lectionary transitions back to the Gospel of Mark. After the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus traveled about the whole region of Gennesaret healing the sick (6:53-56). Jesus' popularity had drawn the attention. Even Herod knew of Jesus (6:14). Scribes from Jerusalem were sent out to investigate. Jesus' disciples were violating a tradition of the elders – a ritual associated with the oral interpretative tradition of the Torah. This interaction revealed how by the time of Jesus what the religious establishment said about God's law had become more important than the law itself. Jewish tradition blinded them from recognizing who Jesus was. To what extent do our traditions cause us to miss the Kairos moment in our time?

### **Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 Commentary**

<sup>1</sup> *Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem,*  
<sup>2</sup> *they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.*

The fact that scribes are sent from Jerusalem underscores the extent of Jesus' popularity since Jesus' Galilean ministry requires an "official" investigation from Jerusalem. This was not the first time (3:22). On this occasion, they attack Jesus by finding fault with His disciples (see also 2:23). The investigators saw some of Jesus' disciples eating with unwashed hands.

<sup>3</sup> *(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, <sup>4</sup> and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)*

These verses explain the tradition associated with the ritual cleansing around food. This explanation is an example of why Mark is believed to be writing to a predominantly Gentile audience since He goes into such details that would be unnecessary for a Jewish audience. This was not a violation of Mosaic Law but a violation of a later body of oral explanatory traditions of the Torah (Genesis – Deuteronomy) that was collectively known as the tradition of the elders. This tradition of the elders was regarded as authoritative by the elite religious establishment.

<sup>5</sup> *And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" <sup>6</sup> And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "<sup>7</sup> *This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;**

*do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’<sup>8</sup> You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”*

Jesus does not respond directly to the question but instead with a damning accusation of the Pharisees and scribes as hypocrites. Jesus cites Isaiah 29:13. While the people in Isaiah’s day may have been worshipping God in a way that seemed outwardly proper, they did not honor God with their hearts. Jesus also indicts them for teaching human commandments as though they were doctrine from God. There are 613 commandments of God found in the Torah, but the oral interpretation of the Torah (the tradition of the elders) had over 10,000.

The verses omitted from the lectionary (vv.9-13) refer to how the Pharisees and scribes had come up with a loophole to avoid using their money to take care of their parents as God’s law prescribes. They would claim this money was “*Corban*” or legally dedicated to God and thus unable to be touched for any other purpose.

*<sup>14</sup> And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup> There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”*

Jesus continues by arguing what defiles a person is not what goes into a person (such as by touching food with ceremonially unclean hands). What defiles a person is what comes out of them.

*<sup>21</sup> For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”*

Jesus then lists examples demonstrating what defiles a person is what originates from the heart (which includes mind, emotions, and will). The problem of having a defiled heart is a much deeper and terminal problem than simple ceremonial impurity. The implication is thus religion alone does not address the problem. Tradition, ceremonies, and rituals are not substitutes for faith and repentance. Outward ceremonial purity does not address the inner problem of a sinful heart. Righteousness is not achieved through empty human rituals.

### Reflections

Jewish tradition – the body of oral interpretation of the Torah – eventually became more important than the written Torah. The irony here is what the Son of God instructed violated what humans said about what God said. By focusing on tradition, they missed the Son of God in their midst. The idea of human tradition distorting what God said is not unique to Judaism. The early church suffered from the same fate. By the Middle Ages, tradition and ritual had become distorted and corrupted by the human whims of the religious elite. The Protestant Reformation in the 1500s refocused on Scripture as the supreme authority and put tradition into its proper place. Five hundred years later, however, there are now around 45,000 Christian denominations!

Each generation of Christians faces the same challenge – how do we keep Scripture and tradition in the right relationship. Wisdom of the Holy Spirit captured through the ages in the traditions and confessions of the church are important, but we cannot ascribe inspired status to such human-authored confessions, creeds, and practices. On the other hand, throwing out tradition altogether is equally problematic. Rather than being frozen in another time, our confessions and traditions help us to understand how previous generations of the church approached major socio-political challenges in their time. As the establishment church is facing a great Kairos moment in our time, we should be informed by our rich traditions, not held back by them. Those with most to gain from the *status quo* are usually the ones who are its most zealous defenders.

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