ReMARKable: What is Unclean Anyway? (Ch. 7) Memory Verse: Mark 7:20

Feb. 23rd, 2024 Scripture Reading: Mark 7

**[SLIDE 1]**

Last week, in Mark 6, we saw some the most enduring and well know stories about Jesus. Even non-Christians are familiar with the story of Jesus walking on the water and the miraculous feeding of the 5,000. We highlighted some of the lesser-known parts of the chapter that involved the disciples directly. Remember, they were sent out two-by-two on a very successful preaching tour. They carried with them the message of Jesus, but they also possessed the authority of Jesus. As they went out to preach, they found that through the authority of Christ, they were able to cast out demons and heal the sick, just like Jesus. It was a homerun! This was exactly how things were supposed to progress!

But afterward, when faced with the quandary of how to feed thousands of people, or when faced with the specter of Jesus walking toward them on the waves of the sea, these very same disciples loose their way. They don’t understand, they don’t have faith at least not as much as they thought they did. They went from a homerun to a strikeout. But as modern readers, we love these disciples because we can see ourselves so clearly in them. Their questions, their foibles, their victories and their defeats…we experience much the same in our own walk with Jesus. And we conclude with gratitude that **[SLIDE 2]** Jesus does not give up either on them or on us.

Today brings us to chapter 7 and here we are going to evaluate the question of what constitutes something as clean or not. **[SLIDE 3]** Now, I am married to a nurse. My kids have a nurse for a mother. You may know some nurses in your own life. But one thing all nurses have in common is a vast knowledge of how microbiology works. One of the constant questions in our home is “Did you wash your hands?” Quickly followed by, “Did you use soap?” It is a question we must constantly ask because we are dealing with kids and other people who do not tend to think about how microbiology works. If I can’t see the germs then they must not be there. My kids act like their mother is making up the concept of bacteria every time they are forced to wash their hands. We were making lunchmeat sandwiches one day and, with washed hands, everyone took from the packaging the slices they wanted on their sandwich. One of the kids then wiped their hand on their shirt and, uh-uh, mom saw it. **[SLIDE 4]** “Go wash your hands.” “I just washed them!” “Yes, but now you have touched something that is contaminated, and you need to wash them again….and use soap!” It is a difficult concept to get through, but any science class will tell you that my wife is right. Bacteria is everywhere we need to have freshly clean hands when we are handling food.

So, **[SLIDE 5]** we have a pretty clear definition of what is clean and unclean, but so did the Jewish teachers of Jesus’ day. And that is who we meet again at the beginning of chapter seven. Jesus and his disciples were eating without washing their hands. But before the kids start cheering and the mothers gasp in horror, we need to be very clear…this hand washing was not done for the purposes of hygiene. These Jewish leaders have only ritual uncleanness in mind. **[SLIDE 6]** And Mark takes the time here to inform us about some of this tradition. He explains this washing is done as an observance of the traditional rules set down by the elders to ensure ritual cleanness for all Jews. There was no thought about germs or microbiology. Rather it was a way for Jews to keep themselves separated from the uncleanness of the world around them. They would pour water over their hands with their fingers upturned, and then pour water over their hands a second time with the fingers downward. Every part of this washing ritual was purported to mean something. Through such a practice, you were seen to remain clean. Then these teachers challenge Jesus. In verse 5, **[SLIDE 7]** “Why are your disciples not living according to the rules handed down by the elders but instead eat food with ritually unclean hands?” Jesus responds with Isaiah’s words in chapter 29:13, **[SLIDE 8]** “This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is empty since they teach instructions that are human words.” The sting of having your own scriptures turned back on yourself is pretty infuriating, but Jesus was not done. He calls them experts at rejecting God’s commandment…the one thing they have dedicated their lives too! Jesus gives them an example. Instead of actually honoring their father and mother, they withhold help from their parents in the name of offering more to the temple. They pretend that they are more dedicated to God than they are to their parents who need help and support.

((In verse six, at the beginning of his speech, Jesus calls these teachers **[SLIDE 9]** hypocrites. Now, no one today likes to be called a hypocrite. We use it to mean someone who says one thing and does something else. A hypocrite is basically a liar. It is interesting because this term in the Greek means actor as in someone who performed plays. **[SLIDE 10]** Someone putting on a performance. Someone playing a character. And that is the thrust of Jesus’ words here. These men go through with these ritual acts, washings and offerings and keeping away from certain foods, because they are simply playing a role, nothing more. They go through with these acts, not out of love for God, but because they are playing a role.

To put a cherry on top of the whole interaction, Jesus calls everyone to attention and proclaims, “Nothing outside of a person can enter and contaminate a person in God’s sight; rather, the things that come out of a person contaminate the person.” So, for Jesus, defilement does not come from bacteria on the outside or dirty people on the outside or from broken rules on the outside. **[SLIDE 11]** Defilement comes from within.))

We might hear this message and nod our heads. We understand that we each have an internal struggle with sin and the things we do and say that hurt others or disappoint God find their origin in the depth of our hearts. But to those present at this meal, these words from Jesus completely flipped their entire understanding of how clean and unclean works. William Barclay writes, “Jesus is wiping out at one stroke the laws **[SLIDE 12]** for which Jews had suffered and died…This was…shatteringly new doctrine.” Uncleanness has nothing to do with what someone puts into their body, but everything to do with what comes out of his heart. Now, I think there are many of us Gentile people who hear this teaching from Jesus and we celebrate. We say “Amen!” and turn around and eat our bacon and our porkchops because it’s no longer unclean. We don’t cast people out of church because they have a skin disease. We don’t break dishes and pottery for becoming unclean and we don’t worry about all the many, many other laws that pertain to ritual cleanliness. We feel relief that we do not have to deal with all these rules. But Jesus did not come to abolish the rules, he came to **[SLIDE 13]** fulfill them. He came to show us exactly what all these laws are pointing to.

In verse 17 Jesus leaves the crowd, but the disciples have many burning questions about what they just heard. And Jesus reiterates so there is no confusion: **[SLIDE 14]** the evil thoughts that come from the inside, from our hearts, these are what contaminate a person. So while it is true that we do not have a long list of laws to follow, we do have a sinful heart to contend with. Listen to Jesus’ description of the human heart in verses 21 and 22. **[SLIDE 15]** It is the source of: evil thoughts, sexual sins, thefts, murders, adultery, greed, evil actions, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness. That is quite a list. Jesus is not giving people a break from many rules, he is in fact upping the ante. Yes, we do not have to worry about outside factors contaminating us, but we do need to consider what is coming from our own hearts, a 24/7 obligation, a continual internal battle. We cannot rest when it comes to the fountain of bacteria ridden contaminants that come from our own hearts.

Having dropped this worldview changing bomb onto his fellow Jews, Jesus takes a trip to the northwest and ends up in **[SLIDE 16]** Tyre on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Once again, Jesus is in Gentile territory, that is to say, an unclean place full of unclean people. We saw this back in chapter 5 when Jesus ventured to Gerasa and healed the man named Legion. Mark lets us know in verse 24 that Jesus is trying to lay low but he couldn’t hide. It seems the demons, who know all about Jesus are calling attention to him. A mother, whose daughter was possessed comes to Jesus, falls at his feet and begs him to heal her daughter. Now we have seen Jesus go out of his way to heal **[SLIDE 17]** people throughout the gospel. When he is looking for some quiet time alone to pray and the crowds interrupt, he takes the time to heal them. When he is heading one way and someone asks for his help, he changes course to go and help them. Mark has told us that Jesus’ attitude toward people is **[SLIDE 18]** compassionate. He sees them as sheep without a shepherd. But here, in this interaction with this Gentile woman, we see an unexpected reaction. Jesus responds to this woman, it seems, rather harshly. Verse 27, **[SLIDE 19]** “The children have to be fed first. It isn’t right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” So what is he saying here? By “children” Jesus refers to the children of Israel, the people chosen by God. These are folks who are literally tied to Abraham genetically. Jesus is a Jew himself, his mission has been to the Jewish people, he is the Good Shepherd of the people of God. Israel comes as a priority. But notice Jesus comes to feed Israel first, not exclusively. There will come a time when his ministry will involve all people, but, now is not quite time yet. Hence Jesus was in Gentile territory trying to hide away.

There is another problem here. Jesus does call this woman a dog. **[SLIDE 20]** This can in no way be twisted to mean some sort of term of affection. Many people love dogs these days, but Jesus speaks an insulting word to this woman because a dog was considered to be a filthy scavenger. Why would Jesus speak to a woman in need in such a way?

Unfazed, the woman retorts, **[SLIDE 21]** “Lord,” (notice her term of reverence) “even the dog’s under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Jesus is impressed. “Good answer!” Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter.” So, despite his words, Jesus does answer her request.

As we consider this strange conversation, let’s remember where we have just been. **[SLIDE 22]** Jesus has dismantled the old view of clean and unclean. The Jewish mindset considered this woman to be unclean and she is dealing with an unclean spirit regarding her daughter. But Jesus is declaring that indeed, as a person, she is not unclean. I believe that Jesus insults her as a means to test her faith. **[SLIDE 23]** She had undoubtedly been called a dog by Jews before. That was nothing new for her. But she had a faith that drove her to Jesus and she was not about to be dismissed so easily. She believed that Jesus had the means to deliver her daughter, whether he thought of her as a child or a dog, whether she was clean or unclean. Whatever the case might be, she is going to Jesus. Jesus beams with pride at her response…she gets it. She is pursuing a kingdom that is beyond her normal understanding. She has been moved by faith and not simply by a desire to go through the actions like the hypocrites. She is on to something real, not simply an act for another role.

Verse 31 finds Jesus in the Decapolis, **[SLIDE 24]** another gentile region. People bring to him a man who cannot speak clearly due to the fact that he is deaf. Once again, Jesus takes the time to lead the man away from the crowd and instead of his normal means of conversing with someone, Jesus uses gestures. He puts his fingers in his ears and touches his tongue. He looks up to heaven and sighs deeply. **[SLIDE 25]** Mark records another Aramaic word *Ephphatha,* “open up!” And the man is healed. Despite Jesus’ attempts to quell the story, people spread the news everywhere.

So what is unclean anyway? **[SLIDE 26]** Jesus is clear here: it’s not about the externals. It’s not about hand washing. It’s not about the traditions of the elders. It is all about the state of your heart. We are made unclean by the things that come out of our hearts. Now, my wife is still correct, we ought to wash our hands when working in the kitchen, but in our quest to remain hygienic we cannot ignore what is going on underneath the surface.

After Jesus lays out this teaching Mark takes us to two examples in which Jesus puts this teaching into practice. By interacting with a gentile woman and healing her daughter, by touching a gentile man and healing his inabilities, Jesus declares, in words and actions, that if no food can be declared unclean, then no person can either.

Now, we have all been guilty of **[SLIDE 27]** hypocrisy at some point in our lives. We have all gone through the motions and demanded of others a standard we do not uphold ourselves. We have all played a role and practiced useless rituals while pretending they had meaning. But, Jesus calls us to desist. To stop playing a role, to jump down from the stage and to acknowledge what is really real. This Syrophoenician woman and this Gentile man both come to Jesus raw and in need. They have no mask to wear. They have no script to follow. They come only with their inability. As Gentiles, they are unable to access the blessings of God…they are not part of God’s chosen people. As humans, they are unable to protect themselves from demonic powers or to heal themselves. But their real need drives them to Jesus who is willing and able to heal, to provide and to save.

For our turn, we need to take stock of the masks we wear and the roles we play. What are the things in your heart that you try to hide? How often do you come to Jesus sporting a façade? When is the last time you came crawling to Jesus in the rawness of your need for him? We can’t heal ourselves. We can’t protect ourselves. We can’t avoid the contamination that emanates from the depths of our heart. We can wash and wash and scrub and clean our hands, but we cannot clean ourselves. Jeremiah 2:22 says, **[SLIDE 28]** “Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me.” This heart inside of us is a problem for us all. Only in Christ can we find healing, cleansing, and salvation. Come to Christ in the rawness of your need; no masks or pretense. Come in your uncleanness, your unworthiness. Come to Christ even as a dog and find healing. Amen.