

“They Worship Me in Vain”

The Twenty-First in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 7:1-13; Isaiah 29:13-21

While the people of Israel are not quite sure who Jesus is, they are sure that a major confrontation between Jesus and the religious leadership of Israel is inevitable. As we have seen throughout the sixth chapter of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has preached the gospel of the kingdom in new areas, he has sent out the twelve to preach two by two, and he performed a dramatic miracle in feeding five thousand people out in the wilderness—an event loaded with messianic symbolism. Jesus then walked on water to rescue his disciples from another storm, before arriving in the Gennesaret, where he healed countless people. But as Jesus’ popularity continues to grow and as questions about his true identity continue to swirl, Jesus is now confronted by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. This is an eerie foretaste of what will eventually happen in Jerusalem itself, when Jesus enters the city when his messianic mission comes to its great climax. For as we now learn from Mark, those who oppose Jesus are described as men “sent from Jerusalem.”

As we continue our series on the Gospel of Mark, we now move into Mark chapter 7 which is characterized by conflict and controversy between Jesus and the religious leadership of Israel, as they debate the distinction between clean and unclean, as well as the binding authority of tradition. While the previous chapter dealt with a number of dramatic actions on Jesus’ part, chapter seven deals with Jesus’ teaching and the controversy which results when he challenges the Pharisees’ unbiblical distinction between clean and unclean.¹ All of this debate takes place against the backdrop of the question with which everyone in Israel seems to be wrestling. Who is Jesus?

We have seen that a number of rumors about Jesus were widely circulating. Some people were saying Jesus is John the Baptist, come back to life. This is the rumor which concerned Herod Antipas, who got wind of Jesus’ popularity when Jesus was preaching near Nazareth. Others, most likely the followers of John the Baptist, thought Jesus was Elijah. Many others thought that Jesus was one of Israel’s prophets come back to life. When Jesus fed the people in the desert and provided them with green pastures it was apparent that Jesus was creating a new Israel out in the wilderness and he was signaling that he was preparing to lead a new Exodus. A number of people present that day picked up on the messianic significance of Jesus’ actions and tried to make him king. But Jesus wanted nothing to do with such wild speculation—which was grounded in Jewish nationalism and not a biblical view of the messianic age. To prevent things from getting worse, Jesus immediately left the area and sent his disciples away.

Meanwhile, Mark informs us that the disciples still do not understand the significance of the miracle out in the wilderness because, as Mark says, their hearts are hard. This is a nice theological way of saying that the disciples just don’t get it! And so when Jesus approached his disciples during a storm on the Sea of Galilee, walking on the water to reach them, they failed to recognize him and thought him to be a ghost. Although Jesus called out to the disciples, using words which YHWH used in the Old Testament, they were terrified. Even though the twelve had witnessed Christ’s Lordship over creation, even though they had witnessed Jesus raise the dead, and even though they were present when Jesus fed the five thousand out in the wilderness, and even though they had participated in preaching the good news about

¹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 276-277.

the kingdom, still, they were not able to grasp just who, exactly, Jesus is.

And then we have the religious leaders of Israel. According to Mark, the scribes and Pharisees have not approved of Jesus nor his ministry from the beginning. The scribes and Pharisees were furious with Jesus when he ate with tax-collectors and sinners (Mark 2:15-17). They became angrier when Jesus dared to reject their distinction between “clean and unclean.” The scribes and Pharisees also challenged Jesus view of fasting (Mark 2:18-22), and as well as Jesus’ practice of Sabbath observance (Mark 2:23-28). Jesus showed no qualms whatsoever in defying these men and rejecting their oral traditions. Mark has also recounted how the big-wigs from Jerusalem (members of the Sanhedrin) had come all the way to Galilee to check out Jesus’ ministry for themselves, shortly after he appeared in Capernaum (Mark 3:22-30).² Recall that these men actually accused Jesus of being demon-possessed (as a result of which Jesus places upon them the ultimate covenant curse—no forgiveness in this age or in the age to come, because they blasphemed the blessed Holy Spirit). The local scribes and Pharisees in the Galilee had much the same attitude. They accused Jesus of being a sorcerer and a false teacher. While the people of Israel are struggling to figure out who Jesus is, the religious leaders have already made up their minds. Regardless of who Jesus is they will oppose him at every turn. In fact, Mark has told us that from the opening days of Jesus’ ministry, they were already looking for ways to put their own Messiah to death.

As we come to our text this morning, we will treat the first two instances of a larger dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees and teachers of the law which takes up the first part of the chapter. The tension between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel has clearly risen to a new level. Jesus will reject the authority of their oral tradition.

It is hard to tell if the events recorded here in Mark’s Gospel occurred while Jesus was in the Gennesaret since no location or time frame is given. Likely, this serves of conflicts occurred at some point after Jesus returned from the wilderness. These incidents may be placed here because they fit Mark’s larger purpose, which is to explain why Jesus is seeking to preach to different audiences. The disputes recounted in the first 23 verses of the chapter helps to explain Jesus’ subsequent journey to Tyre and Sidon, where even Gentiles believe his message. This positive response from those outside the narrow confines of Israel, stands in marked contrast to the theologians of Israel who are so concerned that Jesus does not accept the authority of their oral tradition and their views on ritual purity that the scribes and Pharisees must confront Jesus with his supposed theological errors.³

From what we have learned about the early phases of Jesus’ ministry, it was absolutely clear that what Jesus was teaching and what the Pharisees were teaching differed as far as the east is from the west. This discrepancy surely caused a fair bit of consternation on the part of the people who had witnessed Jesus suddenly appear in Capernaum as a replacement to John the Baptist of sorts, while performing dramatic miracles. Jesus then openly contradicted much of what their own Rabbis had taught them. While the people hated the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, nevertheless these men were their shepherds and the people relied upon them to correctly interpret the Torah and settle disputes among the people. Jesus had impressive credentials—he was a miracle worker and an exorcist—but his presence was disturbing. While Jesus’ demeanor was mild-mannered and he was obviously compassionate beyond measure, he easily confounded the highly-educated Bible scholars with his words, and he taught things which sent the

² See the summary of this in; Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 244.

³ See the helpful discussion of this in; France, [The Gospel of Mark](#), 276-277.

Canon lawyers experts into fits of rage. Jesus ate with people considered ceremonially unclean—tax collectors and sinners—while he refused to grant the Pharisees any quarter. In fact, Jesus began preaching in parables as if to confound the scribes and Pharisees all the more. Wherever Jesus went, it seems, there was controversy.

According to Mark, at some point, *“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 implication is that Jesus has once again come to the attention of the religious leaders of Israel (the Sanhedrin). They were intentionally watching his every move so as to catch him doing something which would enable them to arrest him or put him to death. Not only did the Pharisees have exhaustive rules and regulations about what things were clean and what were unclean, these rules also included ceremonial washings which, if done properly, rendered food and eating utensils clean so that they could be eaten or used in the preparation or consumption of food. The men from Jerusalem have already been condemned by Jesus back in Mark 3:22-30, and so it is difficult to tell from Mark’s words if these were the same representatives of the Sanhedrin mentioned earlier, or if a new group of righteousness inspectors had arrived from denominational headquarters. In any case, they are clearly trying to trap Jesus.

On the surface, this looks like an argument brought about because Jesus’ disciples do not follow the washing procedures instituted and regulated by the Pharisees. But in reality, this is a debate about the validity of oral tradition itself, which enabled the Pharisees to regulate virtually every area of day to day life in Israel. The problem was that what the Pharisees had been telling the people of Israel that God required something of them that had little or nothing to do with the law as it was given. In other words, they were demanding the people obey the pharisaical oral tradition, even though this tradition had no biblical support whatsoever. Put another way, the scribes and Pharisees were binding people’s consciences to things which are not required of them by Scripture.

Furthermore, in those areas where the law was silent, the Pharisees had filled in the gaps with their own rules and regulations. The result of this was a massive amount of oral tradition, which had grown so large, it had to be regulated and interpreted by full-time scribes. In other words, first century Judaism had become a religion of lawyers. To make matters worse, this oral tradition was binding upon all Israel, even though the vast majority of it had little or no basis in Scripture. As the scribes saw matters, it was their sacred duty to enforce this oral tradition and punish any attempt to undermine it. This is the worst of all worlds—legalistic religious lawyers, forcing their rules and regulations on everyone, even when those rules and regulations had no biblical support. This divided the people living in Israel into two camps—those who complied with the rules of the Pharisees and those who did not. Those who did not, most often Gentiles, were considered “unclean” and regarded as outsiders and worthy of contempt. Those who complied were considered “righteous” and worthy members of the covenant. This bred a society in which external righteousness was everything. Jesus will have none of it.

Since Mark is composing his gospel for a predominantly Gentile audience, he is aware that many of his readers will not understand the nature of these ceremonial washings. These washings are now explained in verses 3 and 4. *“(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.)* While this stems from Exodus 30:19 and 40:13, in which the priest is commanded to wash his hands before he entered the tabernacle, the practice was soon extended by the Pharisees to include everyone. In fact, by the time of the second century B.C. many Jews were following the practices of the

priests. People washed their hands in the morning before morning prayer. The benediction used by the priests at the time of consecration was now being recited by the people as part of the course of daily life.⁴ Many felt that eating bread without a ceremonial washing, rendered the bread “unclean.” The irony is that the Pharisees championed what we might call the “priesthood of all believers.” Ordinary Jews were expected to be every bit as scrupulous with these ceremonial rituals as were the priests of Israel.⁵

The reason why the Pharisees sought to see such ritual purity practiced throughout all Israel is important to understand. In their zeal—which is commendable—they wanted to see all of Israel fully devoted to YHWH and to his law. One of the key verses in their theology was Leviticus 20:26: “*You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.*” If Israel was to be holy as a nation, then all human conduct must be regulated by the law. The problem with this interpretation is that this was not the reason why the law was given to Israel. Paul says the law was given to serve as a school master to drive Israel to Christ (Galatians 3:24).⁶ The other problem is that the law only serves to heighten human sinfulness. As Paul puts it in Romans 7:7, “*I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet.’*” While the Pharisees were zealous about the law, the law was doing exactly what God intended it to do. It was exposing human sin and the need we all have of a Savior. But this is the very thing the Pharisees could not see nor understand.

Because the Pharisees so misunderstood the purpose of the law, their zeal is worked out in completely unbiblical ways. One of these was stressing the need for ceremonial washings, which involved pouring water upon the hands. Enough water could be cupped with the hand to accomplish this, but then distinctions were made which allowed sprinkling water on the hands, immersing the fingers or the entire hand in water. In Jesus’ day, these distinctions were a big deal since there was no running water and all water had to be carried from its source to the home. The acceptable level of washing was a cupped hand full of water, unless the food to be eaten had been purchased in the marketplace, in which case the entire hand had to be immersed in water up to the tops of the fingers.⁷ It was no wonder it took professional scribes to ensure that people properly complied with these rules and regulations.

Jesus rejected all such oral tradition out of hand. This explains the occasion for the debate as recounted by Mark in verse 5. “*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?’*” The intent of the question is not idle curiosity—“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition? We’d really like to know?”—but is a not too thinly veiled attempt to trap Jesus. Why is Jesus, a Rabbi, allowing his disciples to engage in improper behavior? If Jesus even answers the question—phrased along the lines of the trick question, “have you stopped beating your wife?”—he admits to breaking the law. In the minds of his questioners, he would be guilty of a serious offense.

Jesus will answer them, but not as they expect. According to verses 6-8, “[Jesus] *replied, ‘Isaiah was*

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 245.

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 246.

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 246.

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 246-247.

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.'" Jesus cites from Isaiah 29:13, part of our Old Testament lesson. Not only does Jesus use one of Israel's most widely read prophets to demonstrate that the oral tradition of the Pharisees is completely invalid, Jesus goes so far as to conclude that Isaiah's words of condemnation of Israel at the time of the conquest, equally apply to the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day. According to Jesus, Israel is an as bad a shape now (or even worse), than it was during the days of the wicked kings, despite all of the efforts of the Pharisees to regulate life.

Notice that Jesus does not even attempt to answer their trick question. Jesus does, however, challenge the very premise of it. Man-made rules and traditions are not binding, only the law of God is. These rules and regulations may be signs of the Pharisees' great zeal, but in actuality they demonstrate the sad fact that their hearts are far from YHWH, hence their great zeal is absolutely in vain. Jesus says these men are hypocrites, that is, they are men who play a role on a stage but who are in reality someone else. To the people of Israel, the scribes and Pharisees look like Holy and godly men. But inside they are secretly full of godlessness.⁸ They do not worship God according to his word, nor do they exercise what we would call faith. In one fell swoop, Jesus categorically denies the validity of their oral tradition.⁹ These men may claim to defend the law by arguing that their humanly-contrived rules help preserve the integrity of the law, but in actuality, their rules only end up distorting the law and rob it of its true authority by substituting their rules for God's law.¹⁰

Jesus will now drive the point home even further. As we read in verse 9, Jesus *"said to them: 'You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!'"* The irony should be clear. Those who appear the most zealous to uphold the law have substituted their own rules in its place. They are quite subtle about it, but nevertheless this is exactly what they were doing. Notice that Jesus speaks of this as "their tradition" while reaffirming the validity of God's law. So, here are those who challenge Jesus for being a law-breaker now finding themselves being forced to defend the validity of their oral tradition over against the validity of the law. Jesus has completely turned the tables on them. And they are stunned.

In verses 10-12, Jesus now exposes their hypocrisy from Scripture. *"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."* Citing but one example, Jesus shows how the pharisaical traditions flatly contradicts Scripture. To call something Corban (a gift) was to set it aside for God's purposes.¹¹ In this case, Jesus is referring to a vow to dedicate everything someone had to God, only to have them realize later on that the vow was rash or taken in haste. In such cases, if a son dedicated his personal property to God and

⁸ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 235.

⁹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 249.

¹⁰ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 236.

¹¹ See the discussions of Corban in: Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 237-238; and Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 250-251.

then followed the Pharisaical regulations, his parents would no longer have use of his property, thereby depriving them of the honor due them from their son. Thus the oral tradition makes a convoluted mess of a very simple commandment and in effect, constitutes an end-run around the authority of Scripture. In the process, the meaning of Scripture is utterly and totally distorted.

Jesus points out the grave consequences of this in verse 13. *“Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”* What began as a trick question, quickly became a lesson in biblical hermeneutics (the interpretation of Scripture). Jesus has shown how the Pharisees have no biblical leg to stand on when they accuse Jesus of violating their oral traditions. Not only are their traditions nothing but rules of men and therefore not binding, but in their efforts to defend the letter of the law, they have completely misunderstood and distorted the purpose of the law in the first place. Even though they claim to be the experts in handling and interpreting Scripture, sadly, they end up pitting both their own rules and regulations, as well as the biblical commandments, against each other. Jesus will have none of it. Therefore, the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees end up nullifying the very word of God they claim to be defending. They are not guardians of the law. Rather they have mishandled and distorted the law. In fact, says Jesus, they do many things like this!

Even as the question of Jesus’ true identity lurks in the background, throughout this debate we continue to get a sense of just who exactly, Jesus is. Jesus quotes the Scripture and interprets it as though he wrote it. He really is the authoritative interpretive of Scripture, for he is not only Israel’s Messiah, he is Israel’s greatest prophet. And for this, the scribes and Pharisees will now step up their efforts in opposition to his ministry.

What application to our circumstances can we draw from Jesus’ encounter with the Scribes and Pharisees?

There are two lessons to be drawn from Jesus’ encounter with the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. Christians are not, and indeed cannot, be bound by the rules of men. While many of these rules are often based in wisdom, they cannot be used to bind a Christian’s conscience to things which God has not forbidden (expressly or impliedly) in his word. When we say we believe in *Sola Scriptura*, we are saying that we are bound to obey the law of God (in our case, the moral law, the Ten Commandments) and that we are not bound to any man-made rules and traditions. While critics of Christianity see the law of God as narrow and restrictive, Scripture speaks of the law as giving perfect freedom (James 2:12). To put it rather simplistically, God gave us Ten Commandments, not countless volumes of canon law. These Ten Commandments are for the most part, so simple, even our children know what they mean without the aid of a scribe or Pharisee to interpret it for them. God binds us to obey his commandments, not to obey the rules of men. It is that simple.

Let me use an easy foil—smoking. We know smoking is harmful, expensive, and for reasons of health and longevity of life, people should give it up. But smoking is not a sin. I’ll never forget the video that Shane Rosenthal shot at a CBA convention of a noted TV evangelist who had just railed against the evils of smoking and consuming adult beverages. This man was sitting at a table at the CBA pancake breakfast. He was shoveling pancakes into his more than 300 pound body about as fast as he could go. Is not gluttony explicitly condemned by Scripture? But this is where the scribes and Pharisees leave us. They have rules and regulations for everything, and yet none of them can deal with our sin, nor restrain us from doing evil. There may be gluttons here this morning. There may be people as thin as a rail. Both stand condemned before God apart from Christ, not because of what you eat or did not eat, but because God will measure you by his law, not by standards we invent and apply to others. The

pharisaical mind set not only denies the sufficiency of Scripture by adding man-made rules and regulations to the canon of Scripture, none of these rules can do one thing to stop us from sinning. We may not put cigarette smoke in our lungs or too much food in our stomachs, and yet you can be sure that all our hearts are filled with all kinds of sin and evil. Jesus dismissed such rules out of hand.

This leads to second evil we see in our passage—the self-righteousness on the part of those who invent rules and then think they are righteous because they keep them. While Jesus ate with tax-collectors and sinners, preaching the gospel to them, the scribes and Pharisees condemned these people because such sinners did not follow the Pharisees' rules. And yet, as Jesus says, the Pharisees are hypocrites. Matthew's tax-collecting buddies needed to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus for a justifying righteousness. But Matthew's friends did not think of themselves as holier than everyone else. This is why the great physician came to save the sick, not those who do not think they need a doctor.

Nothing is as big an impediment to the preaching of the gospel as religious “know it alls” who self-righteously pronounce judgment upon others. And yet Jesus singles these people out for the harshest of criticism. He calls them hypocrites. They pretend to be one thing, but are really something else. They claim to be righteous and yet are filled with sin. They claim to rightly divide the word of God and yet completely mishandle it. Jesus grants them no quarter. He dismisses their rules and traditions outright.

The good news is that the blood and righteousness of Jesus is sufficient to save sinners on everybody's list. Jesus saves smokers. He saves those who eat too much. He saves those who don't, but are proud of it. He saves prostitutes and tax-collectors. He saves average Joes and housewives. He saves moguls and movie stars. He even saves hypocrites and self-righteous know it alls, if these people acknowledge their sins, repent of them, and trust in Jesus to save them from the wrath that is to come.

But Jesus does not save anyone who thinks that their righteousness is good enough to grant them entrance into heaven. He does not save people who think they are fine just as they are, or who see no need of a Savior. This, then, is why the scribes and Pharisees sought out Jesus. His very presence exposed them as the sinners they were. And that hated him for it. And he could say of them, “they worship me in vain.”

But now as then, Jesus calls out to us, “repent of your sins and believe the good news,” which is that his righteousness is sufficient to save when yours is not. This is why Jesus came to Israel then, and why he comes to us now through word and sacrament now. Jesus loves repentant sinners, but he has no quarter for the self-righteous. Sadly, they worship him in vain. Amen!