

## Scripture Reading for Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018

### Jeremiah 31:31-34

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. <sup>33</sup> “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. <sup>34</sup> No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

### Text: Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

<sup>7</sup> The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus <sup>2</sup> and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup> (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup> 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.) <sup>5</sup> 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 defiled hands?” <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’

<sup>8</sup> You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

<sup>14</sup> Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. <sup>15</sup> Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” <sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. <sup>18</sup> “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? <sup>19</sup> For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) <sup>20</sup> He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. <sup>21</sup> For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup> adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

## Sermon: Evil Comes From The Inside

There was once a young man who, in his youth, professed his desire to become a great writer. When asked to define “great” he said, “I want to write stuff that the whole world will read, stuff that people will react to on a truly emotional level, stuff that will make them scream, cry, howl in pain and anger!” He now works for Microsoft, writing error messages!

One of the things about a joke is that it is meant to be short! You don’t need a complete explanation because you and the listener share a common world. When we *don’t* “get” a specific joke, it is because we don’t understand the context or the assumed metaphors that make it so funny. One of the difficulties with Mark 7 is that unless we are immersed within a Jewish world, we won’t get the point; it is an “in-house” story. Indeed, verses 3 and 4 are a sarcastic literary aside<sup>1</sup> because Mark is having to explain Jewish customs concerning ritual washing to his readers. They won’t get the point without knowing the context, and – incidentally – this is one of the reasons why scholars conclude that Mark’s audience was primarily non-Jewish.

Moreover, it’s hard for *us* to understand this issue today because the idea of *physical* holiness is alien to our understanding of religion. But the Jewish *priests* in those days had to perform all kinds of ritual washing before they could come into God’s presence at the Temple.<sup>2</sup> They did this on fear of *death*; and I am so relieved - as a minister – that I don’t have to do those things! This ritual washing was meant as a sign of *purity* before God, and – as so often is the case – rituals can be continued long after we have forgotten what they mean. Now when the Israelites first reached Mount Sinai, God told Moses, “You shall be for me a *priestly* kingdom and a *holy* nation,”<sup>3</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> century Pharisees in their zeal took that literally! For them, *everyone* should live holy lives *as if* they were all priests! If the people did that, they hoped God would step into history and “make Israel great again,” like in the King David’s day. Moreover, the Pharisees were concerned that if the people didn’t, those political ambitions would be delayed further or, worse, God’s judgement would become more severe.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, they wanted everyone to ritually wash their hands before eating and after coming home from the market, and keep all sorts of other regulations. Those who lived like this were deemed “righteous” by the Pharisees, and those who didn’t were labeled “sinners” - regardless of their moral behavior and character.

In our story today, Pharisees and some authorized teachers of the law [“scribes”] from Jerusalem had come to Jesus complaining that his disciples were eating food with hands that had not been *ritually* washed. Please understand, this is *not* about hygienically weekly washing your hands before you eat dinner! No, the Pharisees believed that food should be eaten with *sanctified* hands, *not* “ordinary”

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<sup>1</sup> Translators have placed such obvious “asides” within brackets in our Bibles. The mention of “all the Jews” is obviously an exaggeration!

<sup>2</sup> See Exod 30:17–21;

<sup>3</sup> Exod 19:6.

<sup>4</sup> That is one reason the religious leaders found John the Baptist to be such a curious figure; he was performing a ritual washing and speaking of repentance, while also criticizing their hypocrisy. See Mark 1:1-8; Matt 3:1-12; Luke 3:1-20.

hands. The Greek word translated as “defile” here<sup>5</sup> has its root meaning from the word “to make common” or “ordinary.” The corresponding word in Hebrew is connected with “unclean,” meaning *not* holy. In Leviticus, being “unclean” means being *unacceptable* to God, a status that must be rectified through washing and sacrifice.

These Jewish leaders wondered, then, why *some of Jesus’* disciples didn’t live by the “tradition of the elders.”<sup>6</sup> This question sought to embarrass Jesus in front of the crowds and thus undermine his authority as a teacher.<sup>7</sup> This controversy doesn’t arise from nowhere. Jesus has already been in conflict with the Pharisees in Capernaum over the issue of fasting, and Jesus declared there that he was the “Lord of the Sabbath.”<sup>8</sup> These zealous religious experts wanted Jesus and his disciples to promote not just the law of Moses, but the legalistic “tradition of the elders.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus opposes that burdensome oral tradition and distinguishes between those *human* customs and the commandments of *God*. In other words, he appeals to the superiority of Law and the Prophets over man-made rules. He saw the Pharisees as “hypocrites,” meaning their whole lives were a pious act and there was no sincerity behind their behaviour at all. Such people carried out religious rituals no matter what their hearts and thoughts were like. He indicts them using the words of God from the prophet Isaiah: “The LORD said: ‘These people draw near me; they *honor me with their lips, while their heart is far from me*, and in vain do they worship me, *teaching human precepts* and teachings. Therefore look, I will proceed to remove this people. I will remove them and destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will hide.’”<sup>10</sup>

We learn two important things from this: We, like Adam and Eve, can’t hide from God; God knows our hearts. Second, *what* spiritual traditions or rituals we follow *won’t* make us holy or pure in God’s eyes. We all need to reflect on that sobering thought today. What will, then, make us holy before God?

Apparently, Jesus had a lot to say about religious hypocrites, and Matthew 23 lists 7 condemnations or “woes” against them! Jesus’ response here in Mark turns the table on the Pharisee’s concerns and implies that *their* hearts are far from God. Jesus thereby silences his critics; his authority as a teacher *who can speak on behalf of God has been both challenged and refuted*. Consequently, Jesus is able to continue addressing the crowds.<sup>11</sup> We often fail to appreciate this crucial matter of *authority*. Moreover, we fail to understand that what Jesus said next was *totally revolutionary* at the time!

Mark places this discussion in the region of Gennesaret, on the *western* shore of the Sea of Galilee. This is *Gentile* territory, an appropriate place for a discussion about holiness and Jewish purity rituals as Jesus begins a new phase of his ministry. Moreover, Mark knew his predominantly non-Jewish readers

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 7:15, 18, 20, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 7:3,5. Evidently some did!

<sup>7</sup> Mark 7: 3-4, shows that Mark and his readers had no sympathy with the (Jewish) issue being raised.

<sup>8</sup>Mark 2:18-3:6, 22-30. Being “Lord of the Sabbath” implies that he is the legitimate interpreter of the Mosaic law!

<sup>9</sup> In the third century, a summary of all these rules and regulations was made and written down – known as the *Mishnah*.

<sup>10</sup> Isa 29:13-14 LXX. (The Greek LXX is more pertinent here than the Hebrew MS.) See also Isa 6:9–10.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 7:14.

struggled with this contentious issue because it separated them from the Jewish-Christian community, including sharing meals together.<sup>12</sup> Mark evidently takes material from the oral tradition about Jesus and retells it with this contemporary situation in mind. In the process, the topic of debate shifts from (a) *how* to eat [washed versus unwashed hands] to (b) the *authority* for making such decisions [word of God versus tradition of the elders] to (c) what truly *defiles* a person or makes them unholy [what goes “in” to a person versus what comes “out” of them; the stomach versus the heart; the *kinds* of food you eat versus intentions and actions.] Putting it bluntly, *what* you eat, and *how* you prepare to eat, doesn’t make a person holy or pure. These things are concerned with *external* categories; Jesus insists that impurity comes from *within* – from the heart.<sup>13</sup>

Mark’s understanding of this teaching is summarised in another literary aside to his readers: “In saying these things, Jesus declared *all* food clean.”<sup>14</sup> This unambiguous declaration would be a welcome affirmation to non-Jews, who certainly didn’t observe any restrictions about food. But it was *truly* radical stuff for Jews to swallow! Never mind the human “tradition of the elders,” says Mark, Jesus is now acting *with God’s authority* in declaring that all foods are clean! For Mark, Jesus was reinterpreting the Mosaic Law and announcing that the time Jeremiah spoke of had now arrived: “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*”<sup>15</sup> If God’s Law is truly “on our hearts” what will inevitably come out of a person will be wholesome and pure.<sup>16</sup>

The disciples didn’t understand the cryptic metaphor or image [“parable”] that Jesus used. And so Jesus repeats it again and expands the key point: “What *comes out* of a person is what “defiles” them, [in other words, makes them unholy/impure before God]. For it is from *within*, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come, sexual immoralities,<sup>17</sup> thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, malice, deceit, (sensual) wickedness, envy, abusive speech, arrogance and (moral) foolishness.<sup>18</sup> All these evils come from inside and defile a person,” says Jesus.<sup>19</sup> This list of sins is fairly standard within the New Testament. Many of them echo the 10 Commandments. Some of them, like greed and pride, refer to *attitudes* rather than *behavior*. The initial six items are plural indicating that they are repeatable actions, and the final six are pointing to character traits.<sup>20</sup> Some of those attitudes are a disease of the spirit that also reflect a resistance to God, as well as a contempt for other people. In this way Jesus affirms that people can still be “defiled” or “unclean” and therefore cannot come in to the presence of holy God, however, it is *not* a matter of eating the wrong food but of the *heart* and the intentions and actions that proceed from it.

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<sup>12</sup> See Acts 11:1–9; 15:1–29; Gal 2:11–14.

<sup>13</sup> Remember it is the “heart” (the Jewish thinking) that at the center of thought and will, and they determine the real character of the person.

<sup>14</sup> Mark 7:19b. This is at least how Mark himself understood the teaching to mean!

<sup>15</sup> Jer 33:33.

<sup>16</sup> Incidentally, Mark’s worldview has a keen awareness of the roles of demons. Yet he does not attribute human sinfulness to victimization by demonic powers. Humans are responsible, it is from their own hearts that sin comes out.

<sup>17</sup> Sexual immorality (Greek *pornea*) is associated with idolatry, which is the primal sin against God.

<sup>18</sup> Moral foolishness is an arrogant rejection of God, (cf. Ps14:1; 53:1).

<sup>19</sup> Mark 7:20-23.

<sup>20</sup> This is made clear in the NASB and LEB translations.

And so, Jesus does not abolish the Jewish concept of “defilement,” but he interprets in a very different way to that of the Pharisees, one that is inclusive of non-Jews.

This was a dangerous thing for Jesus to proclaim because the ‘Pharisee movement’ arose out of the rise of Jewish nationalism in the previous two centuries, from times when some Jews were *martyred* for resisting the eating of non-kosher food.<sup>21</sup> Is Jesus therefore saying these national “heroes” died in vain? Moreover, is not Jesus contradicting the Old Testament Law? Yes and no. Yes, the Old Testament Law says, “don’t eat pork,” and Mark (at least) thinks that Jesus is saying that this doesn’t apply anymore. But no, because Jesus turns the conversation to talk about the *intent* of the Law. In this way *his own* authority as the Law’s *interpreter* is being asserted as *above* that of the Jewish legal experts. By implication, Jesus is saying that the purity laws, including food laws, don’t touch the real human problem, and *that* is what ultimately the kingdom of God addresses. Put a different way, when you arrive at the destination you don’t need signposts anymore, not because they were worthless, but precisely because they were correct; you’ve arrived! It is not that we can dismiss the Old Testament Law completely, rather its fulfillment is to be found in Jesus Christ because “the Kingdom of God *is at hand*.”<sup>22</sup> So when we ignore those purity laws today, it is *not* because they were irrelevant, it is because the deeper truth to which they pointed has now arrived. They were pointing to Jesus as the one who can bring in *new heart*, out of which good things emerge, and the rest of Mark’s gospel will explain how that can happen.

What are we to make of this today? The identification of the human *heart* as a moral compass is vitally important. The story is often told of G. K. Chesterton, in response to a question in the *Times*, “What’s wrong with the world?” simply wrote, “I am.” It was an acknowledgment that much of the evil in the world is *human* in origin. This brings it home to every one of us; the world is *not* divided into “good” people and “bad” people, *each* of us can have evil thoughts and intentions, and sometimes we act them out. So we should *not* be quick to blame *others* thinking that we are somehow one of the “good” ones in the world. The famous Russian dissident, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, put it this way: “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of *every* human being.” Those who are spiritually sensitive are aware of this fact, and own up to it. The first step in being right with God is, then, a matter of the *heart*.

Furthermore, Jesus is *not* saying that if we would just listen to what our hearts are telling us then all will be well and we will discover true happiness. What if the feelings that we have currently turn out to be envious, adulterous, hateful, and the rest? We deceive ourselves if we suggest that getting in touch with our *truest* feelings will somehow sort this out. We are not as pure or noble as we might like to think we are. And we can’t isolate one part of our human makeup and blame *it* for evil. No, Jesus is insisting that good *and* bad physical actions *both* come from internal attitudes within each one of us.

So far in today’s reading, Jesus is giving a diagnosis; he has not yet specified the cure! This is where Jesus’ “good news” message of the kingdom of God is going. I’ll give you a hint! We *can’t* cure ourselves.

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<sup>21</sup> e.g., 1 Macc 1:62–63.

<sup>22</sup> Mark 1:15.

What we need is a *new heart*, the kind of God-orientated heart the Old Testament prophets, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, spoke of. Having a new heart, or becoming a “new creation,” is a key feature of the kingdom of God. But, shockingly, what Jesus has done in today’s story is thrown wide open the door of access to God to everyone who comes to him and believes. His bold agenda is in tearing down the burdensome barriers of human traditions and he embraces *both* Jews or non-Jews. And in all this, Jesus is claiming to speak on behalf of God!

Who is speaking on behalf of God today, to pass on this good news of God’s acceptance? Who is offering the *authentic* way of life which honors the God who spoke through the Scriptures? That needs to be you and me! May we cooperate with God’s Spirit, who lives within our hearts, in all we think, feel, and do in the week ahead. Amen.