

“Merciless Men and a Merciful Christ”

Mark 7:1-37

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Opening Prayer

Throughout all four Gospels, there always seems to be religious elites who are present to accuse Jesus. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes are mentioned over and over as scoffing at Jesus, seeking ways to accuse Him, and as we all know they eventually plot to have Him murdered. Mark 7 opens with one of these instances where Jesus and His disciples are accused by the Pharisees of not following tradition.

It was a man-made law, this rule of ceremonial handwashing. Its roots were in the ceremonial purification laws for priests, given in Leviticus. What was originally only supposed to be for priests, and only before eating a sacrificial offering, had been changed by the religious elites into being required for everyone. This special ritual, which was man-made and not God given, actually had supplanted any sort of Godly behavior. A famous Jewish scholar from the time was noted as saying “If I only had enough water to either quench my thirst lest I die, or fulfill the handwashing required in the Mishnah... I would wash my hands and then die.” It was foolish Beloved. It was also highly hypocritical, as Jesus shows, because these same religious leaders who were angry that Jesus’s disciples didn’t ritually wash their hands were perfectly ok to outright disobey God’s laws in other ways.

Quoting Isaiah, Jesus speaks of them thus “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” Jesus gives an example of their hypocrisy. One of the Ten Commandments is “honor your father and mother.” To not do so, actually, was punishable by death. This isn’t talking about speaking angrily to one’s dad or backsassing one’s mother, but rather about taking care of one’s parents. There was no social security, no pension plan, etc. For elderly people to survive, their children, grandchildren, and relatives had to watch out for them. The Pharisees had subverted this with a self-enriching law. If a person “dedicated” everything they owned to the temple, then they didn’t have to provide for their parents. In other words, the temple and the Pharisees who got rich through the temple, were more important than preserving life. Jesus has no time for such evil and merciless

behavior. Calling the crowd to Himself, He speaks a parable to them to show how sin comes from within.

“Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.” The disciples, struggling to understand, ask Jesus further about this. Jesus gives them the answer “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.” In other words Beloved, Jesus makes it plain purity or impurity before God is a matter of the heart. Ritual cleansings, fancy clothes, titles, and like don’t make someone holy. What makes a person holy before God is their heart, and whether He dwells within it. What the merciless Pharisees miss when it comes to following God is that it is all about faith.

The second half of the chapter shows just how different Jesus is when compared to the Pharisees. While they were only concerned about outward appearance (defying God’s laws enormously in the process), Jesus cares only about the heart. He and His disciples leave the region and end up in Tyre, a non-Jewish area. While He is there, a Syrophenician woman hears that He has come. It should be noted that being a Syrophenician, she would have been polytheistic (worshipping many gods), and she would have been non-Jewish. Both of those would have disqualified her from anything regarding Judaism. She comes to Jesus, probably only having heard that He is a prophet, with a huge request. Her daughter is demon possessed. She persistently asks Jesus to cast out the demon, to which Jesus responds “Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Beloved, there is a ton to unpack there in a very short time, but suffice it to say Jesus is testing her faith.

A couple of notes on this. One is that, since Jesus says “be satisfied first”, His plans actually do include more than the Jews. This happens, as we know now, after Pentecost when the entire world is opened up to the Gospel. Secondly, the term used for dogs here is the same that would be used for pets. This shouldn’t be confused, as some modern “scholars” would say, as Jesus being racist or something, calling the woman and her child mongrels. Finally, knowing the

context for the woman, this is a test if she really will believe. Jesus has no obligation to heal the little girl. He has no obligation to anyone, really, since He is God in human flesh. Yet, when she responds “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children’s crumbs.” She shows her faith, and He mercifully does as she asks. She shows her faith in two ways through her statement. First she calls Him “Lord.” She acknowledges who is in charge. She also correctly shares that even the pets are fed, even those who are second still have a share. Jesus, who knows everything, has given her a chance to show her faith to all around including herself. No doubt she went home and glorified God mightily when she saw what had happened, and no doubt her faith was salvific.

To end, I want you to see the contrast between Jesus and the religious elites, and to see how this opens the door for you and me. While the Pharisees only cared about religious appearance, Jesus cares for what is internal. The woman who came to Him would have been spiritually unclean in every way. She wasn’t a believer at first, she wasn’t Jewish, and she would have been impure for a whole host of other reasons...at least according to the Pharisees. Yet, when Jesus puts her to the test, she puts her faith in Him and for that her daughter was healed. For you and I, we should take to heart that it isn’t what is on the outside that makes someone pure or impure. It isn’t about the clothes you wear. It isn’t about having the right last name, or being a member, or fulfilling certain religious obligations. This is about faith in Christ, about knowing and believing and trusting that He alone can save. If you have put your faith in Him, then your salvation is assured. If your faith is in something else, if you think you can look the part but not act it within your soul, then you are missing the boat. Jesus is merciful to any and all who would call upon Him, while the world is not. Let us pray.

Closing Prayer