

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You lived a life amongst ordinary people during troubled times; and despite all that was happening, You healed the sick, preached the Good News, set people free and teach about God's Kingdom. In these and in many other ways, You did the will of God the Father, and brought salvation to a hurting world, not just for people of Your day, but for all people for all time. We praise You, Lord Jesus: AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Nuclear power

Pray for those government departments with the responsibility of the regulation and control of the nuclear industry. Pray for wisdom and integrity amongst those concerned.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for Madagascar, and the political unrest there*
- *Give thanks for the food you eat and the God who gave it*
- *Pray for all those working to expose injustice in the world*

Meditation

Start by listening carefully;

Hear the voice of the Lord, and determine to walk forever in His ways.

Learn intelligently;

Know what God commands and requires of you; this is a light to your path.

Plan realistically;

Measure yourself against the righteousness of God, as found in Christ.

Work diligently;

Give your all for the Kingdom of God and its fruitfulness here on earth.

Evaluate shrewdly;

Seek to discern what is right or wrong, good or evil, and act accordingly.

Share liberally;

For the Lord has charged His people to love one another without exception.

And speak boldly;

Preach the Gospel through every means available to you, and be blessed!

Bible Study - Mark 7:1-13

¹ Now the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had been brought from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, ² and observed that some of his disciples were eating bread with hands which they considered unclean, because they had not been washed. ³ (For Pharisees and all Jews were not supposed to eat without ceremonially washing their hands, and keeping the 'tradition handed down by their ancestors'. ⁴ After coming from the market-place, they were not supposed to eat without ritual washing. They also hold on to many other 'traditions' such as the ritual washing of cups, pitchers and bowls – and also beds) ⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, 'why don't Your disciples conduct themselves according to the traditions of the ancestors, but eat bread

with ritually unclean hands?' ⁶ He said to them. 'Isaiah prophesied correctly about you hypocrites; as it is written;

"These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are distant; they are far away from me. ⁷ They worship me in vain, teaching human instructions as if they were doctrines."

⁸ You have abandoned the commandments of God but cling to human tradition!'

⁹ Then He said to them, 'You have a good way of rejecting God's commandments in order to set up your "traditions"! ¹⁰ For Moses said; "Honour your father and mother", and, "whoever curses their father or mother will surely die." ¹¹ However, you say that if someone says to a father or mother, "whatever financial support you might have received from me is 'corban' (dedicated to God), ¹² then they are no longer required to do anything for the father or mother! ¹³ In this way, you nullify the Word of God by the traditions you have passed down. You do many more things like this.'

Review

This reading from Scripture contains sharp exchanges between Jesus and the religious authorities. Firstly, about the regulations for ritual washing which the Pharisees regarded as central to everyday life in Israel (7:2-8), and secondly, about the way in which God's laws were being interpreted in Jesus' day (7:9-13). If you have read all of Mark's Gospel, you will have noticed that the Pharisees were sometimes present when Jesus healed people (e.g. the paralytic, 2:1-12), and they had a number of disputes with Jesus, notably when some scribes accused Jesus of being Beelzebul (3:22f.). Today's reading begins a dispute between them that went on longer, and it includes tomorrow's reading as well as today's. It begins with a strong attack on Jesus and His disciples by the Pharisees about ritual cleanliness, with an extensive reply from Jesus. We are left in no doubt that as Jesus pursued His ministry, He moved further away from the Judaism of His day.

In reading Jesus' words, you gain the impression that these disputes pained Jesus deeply, because He alone saw the great distance that had opened up between Judaism and God's will for His people. Jesus was a Jew, and as 'the Son of God' (1:11), He knew the truth about what God required of His people. He also knew the commandments and how God meant them to be interpreted, but He did not feel that the spiritual leaders of His day, the Pharisees, reflected the will of His Father.

The Pharisees placed great weight on the 'traditions' of Judaism. Later in the study we will look at why the Pharisees developed these 'aural' traditions, but if we need to know something about them if we are to appreciate what was happening. Jesus and the Pharisees both accepted that the Old Testament was God's Word, and that Moses wrote the Law (Genesis to Deuteronomy). Understandably, the laws were developed over the years, as people applied them to their real life situations; such things were discussed and agreed by scholars (a process called 'Halakah'), and written down in various documents (called 'Midrash').

In this passage, the Pharisees and scribes began by enquiring why Jesus' disciples did not keep the traditional laws requiring washing before eating (7:5); this ritual ensured that both the food eaten and the one who ate were both 'holy'. Such rituals served to distinguish God's people (Jews) from all other people (Gentiles) and maintain their holy calling. Mark explained the rituals (7:3,4), but then reported Jesus' reply. Jesus dismissed the traditions of Halakah and Midrash by using a quote from Isaiah (Is 29:13 – see 7:6,7). These words demonstrate God's desire for His people to worship Him with their hearts rather than live by

required. It is a tough job, because as soon as you begin this, you come across all kinds of problems; equally, if people think they can just start without considering the problems, then chaos ensues! This can be demonstrated by asking people to share the results of their exercise by trying to agree with each other about the details! Of course, all this is starting the wrong way round, for the church of God always starts with a movement of God's Spirit, and not human intent or desire!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *What do you feel about giving money to your church? Do you implicitly trust the church to do what is right, or do you seek to find out what you can about what is done before parting with anything substantial? Pray and ask the Lord what you should do about this.*
- *Ask yourself whether you have little 'ritual's by which you live your own life, and without which you would find hard without them. Do these reflect the work of God in your life?*

Final Prayer

When we are unsure of ourselves, Lord God, encourage us by Your presence. May we see Your compassion in the deeds of others, hear Your words in their speech, and feel Your love through their care. May we then find hope, both in others, in ourselves, and in You. AMEN

'human instructions' (7:7); they are not unique in the Old Testament, but they are certainly 'plain speaking!' This was a perfect text with which to say to the Pharisees; 'You have abandoned the commandments of God but cling to human tradition (7:8)!

Then, Jesus objected further (7:9-13), this time by speaking strongly against any development of the religious traditions that compromised the principles God had given in Scripture. He took a topical issue concerning gifts given to the Temple in Jerusalem, called 'corban'. The religious authorities required such gifts for God's work, but they prevented people from meeting their godly obligations to family care, particular, the elderly. It is a complex issue, and we will look at the details of this later in the study.

If you stand back and examine this passage, however, you will easily see that Jesus appears animated, possibly angry, something like a righteous anger. His Father wanted people to worship Him because they loved Him, not because they had to obey religious rituals! It is all very well for us to read this and enjoy watching Jesus make fools of the Pharisees, but we should at least make sure that we worship God for pure motives ourselves. We need to ensure that we are not living lives that make a mockery of our faith because of ignorance or wilful disobedience to His moral law.

Going Deeper

Whenever we delve into a passage like this which deals with Jewish Law, we have some difficulty today in empathising with those who felt it necessary to live according to such rituals. But if we do take care to think through what was going on, then much of it makes sense, and we can come to a far clearer understanding of God's Word.

The laws of ritual cleanliness.

There are pages and pages of laws in Leviticus about ritual cleanliness (Leviticus 11,12,13,14,15), but it was always obvious that most of these laws applied to ancient times and modes of living which were centuries old even by the time of Christ. The principles were simple. With a few exceptions such as the historic designation of pigs as unclean, God declared most things which were dirty, diseased, or blemished, as unclean, as well as any form of bodily fluids especially blood; in addition, animals, birds, reptiles and fish were also individually designated as clean or unclean. Most of the rules in Leviticus were originally good for the general health of a community, given the knowledge available to people at the time, and they were somewhat more liberal than those of other cultures of the day. Something that was 'clean' was regarded as acceptable to God, and in some cases 'holy'; and something that was not clean was regarded as unacceptable to God and therefore 'unholy'.

By the time the Pharisees came to see Jesus, this ancient way of understanding life had been profoundly 'modernised' by Greek culture following the invasion of the region by the Greeks (by Alexander the Great in around 320 BC). Jewish people abhorred Greek cultural dominance, but conservative Jewish High-priestly families entered into arrangements with the Greeks, and after them the Romans, to run independently those parts of Israel occupied by Jews. In Jesus' day, however, there was an increased sense of national identity for two important reasons, and they both have a direct bearing on this passage of Scripture. Firstly, King Herod the Great (40BC to 4BC) gained a sufficient degree of autonomy from the Romans to build a massive new Temple complex in Jerusalem during his reign. This was the Temple Jesus knew during His own life (which began in Herod's reign – see Matt 2:1f.), and we will return to the subject of the Temple in the last part of the study. The other development happened around the same time, being the growth of the Pharisees as a religious/political party within Judaism. They attempted to re-establish strict Judaism, and were therefore interested in the rigorous pursuit of interpreting the laws of Moses for their own day. Moreover, they took it on themselves to ensure that the

interpretations they established were enforced as the traditions of Judaism. The Pharisees pursued their aims exclusively and rigorously, and when Christianity split from Judaism after Pentecost, the Pharisees were soon in total control of Judaism.

It is not at all surprising therefore that 'scribes from Jerusalem' came to watch what Jesus was doing, and although called 'scribes', they were in fact scholars from Jerusalem of the party of the Pharisees. They had come to pronounce on whether Jesus and His followers were 'keeping the law' as they understood it. In those days, many rural Jewish people kept the laws handed down to them, but were as unaware of some of the more detailed codes of practice in Judaism as we are ignorant of many of the laws within our own countries today. We are only caught out by our lack of knowledge of our own laws when we accidentally break them, and this is what happened to Jesus' disciples. Some of them were working fishermen, and they were caught disobeying the detail of laws which had little relevance to them. When fishing, or going about the tasks of workmen, they did not prepare to eat their food by ritually cleaning their hands with a pre-prepared 'fist sized' amount of ritually purified water (the technical meaning of an obscure part of verse 3) put aside for the purpose in the boat, quarry or carpenter's shop!

Jesus sprung quickly to the defence of His disciples (despite their recent misunderstanding – see 6:52) with a quote from Isaiah which spoke of the primary need for love in the relationship between God and His people, not human laws (see above). Although the point is quite clear to us who are Jesus' followers of a later generation, the scribes would have been incensed at Jesus' reply. For them, no Scripture was more important than 'the Law' (meaning Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), and the 'traditional' interpretation of it which they had created themselves, not even the work of the prophets! Jesus' approach to Scripture was different. He almost always used the prophets (and nearly always Isaiah, as in most of the Gospels) to interpret Scripture rather than tradition. Jesus believed that it was the prophets who connected with the heart of His Father.

The law versus tradition, and the strange issue of 'corban'

It is quite clear that in all these comments by Jesus it was the principles of the matter that were important. However, in the second half of today's passage, Jesus took another step forward in His argument in order to embarrass His accusers, the scribes and the Pharisees. It is fairly clear as you read through the passage (verses 9 to 13) that Jesus was complaining to the Pharisees about their allowance of something called 'corban'; this was a special form of oath by which people could give money to the Temple. Jesus' complaint was that some people used this oath of 'corban' to escape their duties to provide for their own parents in old age, something which was required of them according to the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:12); and what could be more important than the Ten Commandments!

Scholars today frequently argue in their commentaries that the scribes had already ruled that the obligation to parents from the Ten Commandments was more important than oaths of 'corban'. However, what they quote is the 'Mishnah', a document written by Pharisees around 200 years later, and from a time when they had already been stung by this accusation. The picture in Jesus' day was more complex than most modern scholars allow for. When Herod built the Great Temple in Jerusalem (one of the largest buildings of its kind), he did not pay for it all, and neither did the Romans although it is possible that grants were made. Jewish people throughout Israel were 'taxed' for this expensive building project, and large numbers of skilled labourers were taken from all around Israel in order for the work to be done. In Jesus' day, the Temple had only just been finished, and although people were very proud of their magnificent Temple, many were in difficulty because they had been financially drained in order for it to be built. Some made gifts 'corban' not just to the building of the Temple, but to guarantee the financing of the debts accrued, and there

was no way out. What had been promised would be collected, whether local people needed it to support families or not.

You can see how Jesus used this situation to run rings around the scribes from Jerusalem. They were financially secure; being paid servants of the Temple staff, and they failed to understand the burden they placed on local people by the 'corban' gifts of those who could not afford them! The demands of the Temple placed ordinary people in an impossible position before the law, and despite their scholarship, the scribes had no answer to it. When Jesus ended His eloquent destruction of the scribes' arguments, He said, 'You do many more things like this.' In the flow of Mark's Gospel, it is only a 'throw-away' phrase, but if you imagine Jesus winning this repartee with the scribes to the delight of the people listening, these words read like the dismissal of Jesus' enemies with a flourish!

Application

Many would argue with my interpretation of these texts, but I suggest that the circumstantial evidence together with what we know about the days of Jesus is strong enough to support my case. The scholars who came from Jerusalem (7:1) came to find fault with Jesus and His disciples and were easily able to do so. But they were unable to answer the charge that they had failed to establish religious traditions which enabled God's love for His people to be demonstrated and His people to show love for their God. I suspect that something similar is true today and is one reason why many people find it hard to relate to the national and international structures of the church denominations (including so-called 'new' ones). Fewer and fewer church people today feel happy giving money to church authorities and structures which bear little or no relationship to them, and which they do not understand. They are much happier giving towards specific work done by their own church fellowship.

The real challenge of Jesus' words in this passage is directed to all who want to live their lives according to God's laws. Even now, with the salvation of Jesus Christ available to us all, we need to know the moral compass provided by God in the Old Testament, not just in the Ten Commandments, but also in the rest of the 'Law'. Through Christ, the Law has been superseded by grace as a means of accessing Heaven and walking in holiness, but what God has revealed through the Law is still the basis of how the world works, and if we live according to the moral compass found within the first five books of the Bible, we will not go wrong, morally. There is a great deal there which is difficult to understand and some cultural issues to which we cannot relate, but we have to place this before our Lord and ask Him to help us understand it all. It is my experience that He will.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What advantages might there be to 'ritual washing' before meals today?
2. Are we any better at worshipping God with our hearts than people of Jesus' day? What is the difference in our worship since then?
3. How important is tradition to how Christians practice their faith, and how does it affect us?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

As an exercise, I have sometimes asked people to write down what rules and guidelines they think might be needed to successfully run a church in their own country. They must consider the issues of holding property and the legal collection, holding and distribution of money, as well as beliefs that they feel would be essential, or practices that would be