

## KEEP THE TRADITIONS? - MARK 7:1-13

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Last Updated: 05/06/2011

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**Abstract — In a climactic encounter in Mark 7:1-13 Jewish religious leaders challenge Jesus on account of the behavior of his disciples who are eating with unwashed hands. In response to their accusation, Jesus addresses the false pretensions of the Jewish leaders for the lack of importance in the Traditions of the Elder compared with God’s Law. Furthermore, Jesus points out that the tradition of declaring Corban that the Jews have long obeyed has actually violates obedience to God’s Law. So how can they disregard God’s Law and then point their finger at his disciples simply because they fail to observe one of their traditions? God’s commandments are more important than the traditions of humans.**

*General Research Topic(s) — The Gospel of Mark, First-Century Judaism, Teachings of Jesus, New Testament Studies, Christian Contextualization, Exegesis/Hermeneutics.*

### I. INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL OF MARK

From the very beginning, the Gospel of Mark is centered on the theme that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (1:1). The identity of Jesus as the Messiah certainly holds a prominent place in the plot and purpose of this gospel. The gospel develops from this introductory verse with additional witnesses that provide testimonies in affirmation of the truth that Jesus of Nazareth is truly the Son of God. These witnesses include God (1:11; 9:7), unclean spirits (3:11; 5:7), Jesus himself (14:61-62), and a Roman centurion (15:39). Likewise, the Gospel of Mark is also focused

on revealing that Jesus really is the same Messiah that the Old Testament prophets prophesied would come.<sup>1</sup>

This purpose is accomplished as the records of many men and women recount the diverse and often mistaken perceptions about Jesus as indicated by the disciples’ reply when Jesus asked them who people were saying he was, some say Jesus was “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah, and others one of the prophets” (8:28). Thus, a major climactic point in the Gospel of Mark arrives with Peter’s response to Jesus’ inquiry about who the disciples believe him to be – Peter boldly states, “You are the Christ” (8:29).

One way the Gospel of Mark can be structured is by seeing it outlined in a geographical manner.<sup>2</sup> Chapters 1-9 are set within Galilee and the surrounding areas, while chapters 11-16 occur within or around Jerusalem. Chapter 10 describes a transitory time that begins in Judea and includes a description of the travels made by Jesus and his disciples on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus teaches with authority, administers healing to many who are sick, casts out unclean spirits from those who need

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<sup>1</sup> “Mark proclaims that eschatological events have already occurred in the life of Jesus. For example, the Baptist fulfilled Malachi’s prophecy of the return of Elijah, and in the person of Jesus, the Messiah arrived (see 1:1-3; 9:13).” Barry L. Blackburn, “Liberation, New Covenant, and Kingdom of God: A Soteriological Reading of the Gospel According to Mark,” *SCJ* 12 (2009): 219-233.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Stein, “The Gospel According to Mark,” in *NLT Study Bible* (ed. Sean A. Harrison et al.; Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2007), 1642-44.

deliverance, and performs many other miracles as he travels about the region of Galilee and Judea. In a different way, though, the Gospel of Mark can be viewed in a topical fashion. The stories of Jesus' miracles appear to be collected together (1:23-45; 4:37-5:43) as do most of the stories detailing controversy that arose with the Pharisees and scribes – key figures who incite many disputes and debates with Jesus (2:1-3:6; 7:1-23). Also, in a similar manner, several of Jesus' teachings in parables are written conjointly (4:1-34). The conflict described in 7:1-13, which will be investigated in this paper, will be discussed in more detail later on but it is sufficient to note that it describes one of the main controversies that arose between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders in the Gospel of Mark.

## II. LITERARY & NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF MARK

The Gospel of Mark is written in narrative form and frequently identifies chronology within its literary structure. Like most narratives, chronology plays an important part in identifying when certain events occur, and furthermore, how they temporally relate to other events in the gospel. The opening verse designates this part of the narrative as the “beginning of the gospel” (1:1) and correlates this with the coming of John the Baptist through the combined citation of Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1 from the Old Testament (1:2-3).<sup>3</sup> Then, following Jesus' baptism, the Spirit “immediately” (Gk. *euthus*) sends him into the wilderness (1:12) where a period of temptation ensues. Also, when Jesus was finished casting out an unclean spirit from a man in Galilean synagogue it says he “immediately” left to go

to the house where Simon's mother-in-law was sick with a fever (1:29-30). Other places in the Gospel of Mark indicate the time of day when events occurred such as “that evening, at sundown” when many men and women were brought to Jesus who were in need of healing and deliverance (1:32), and also statements like “in the morning” when it says Jesus went out to pray (1:35).

There are also several important words that occur frequently for particular emphasis in the Gospel of Mark. One such word is “immediately” (Gk. *euthus*) which denotes chronological progression but serves an even greater purpose of adding dramatization to the narrative indicating the urgency or compelling nature of Jesus' acts or the way in which people sought after him. But it also serves as an impetus propelling the narrative of the gospel forward. This word occurs 35 times in the Gospel of Mark in such contexts as “immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, head of him, and came and fell down at his feet” (7:25) and “immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way” (10:52). The adverbial form of *euthus*, which is *eutheōs*, also occurs frequently in this gospel for similar purposes and in similar contexts; it is often translated “straightway,” and “forthwith” (1:21, 29, 43; 3:6; 5:29; 6:45; 8:10; 9:24; 14:45; 15:1).

In accordance with the purpose of this gospel to present Jesus of Nazareth as the “Messiah” and the “Son of God,” these titles also have frequent occurrences because they emphasize major theological points regarding the man called “Jesus.” Jesus is the one concerning whom the prophets of old spoke and prophesied of his coming. He would deliver God's people and fulfill the Abrahamic covenant. Proving Jesus' identity as the “Messiah” and “Son of God” is woven throughout the gospel from beginning to end whether in the foreground or in the backdrop. It is this mission which constitutes Jesus' whole life and ministry – the purpose for his willing sacrifice upon the cross. Therefore, the writer of Mark deals heavily with

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Perrin sees the use of Isaiah 40:3 in verse 2 as reminiscence of Israel's exodus from Egypt and the notion that God will deliver his people from bondage. And so, by quoting Isaiah 40:3 here at the beginning of the gospel, Perrin views this prophecy as indicating that “God is in the process of doing the very same thing again – this time through Jesus Christ.” Nicholas Perrin, “Where to Begin With the Gospel of Mark,” *CurTM* 35 (2008): 413-419.

developing this identity through recounting many of the miracles, controversies, and sermons that embrace this unparalleled truth.<sup>4</sup>

When Jesus enters the scene in Mark 1:9, he is baptized by John in the Jordan River and declared by God to be “my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (1:11). This is the second occurrence where Jesus is called God’s Son, the first being in the initial verse of the gospel, and it establishes the overarching theme of Jesus’ identity that the Gospel of Mark centers around. Throughout the next few chapters of the gospel, Jesus is seen beginning his public ministry in and around Galilee where he casts out unclean spirits and heals men and women of many diseases including leprosy and paralysis (1:41-42; 2:10-12).

A second theme is presented when Jesus begins asking certain people who have been the recipients or witness of his miracles not to publicly broadcast the occurrence of the miracles to anyone else. It seems that Jesus did this in an effort to conceal some of the excitement and inevitable uproar that would result from such amazing demonstrations of power that would result in his inability to enter certain cities (1:44-45; 5:43; 7:36-37; 8:26). The writer of Mark appears intent on showing how Jesus made every attempt to keep his true identity secret from the public eye for particular reasons.

A pivotal controversy begins when Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath day, the day that God had set aside for special observance in the law (3:1-5). This prompted the first meeting between the Pharisees and Herodians, who were plotting together how to kill Jesus (3:6). As Jesus’ ministry continues to expand, he selects twelve apostles who become close

followers of him and are endowed with the authority to preach and cast out unclean spirits (3:13-15). Faith is necessary to perform such miracles as Jesus repeatedly demonstrates by example as he confirms that those who request God’s healing power are made whole because of their faith (5:34; 10:52).

Although the apostles finally recognize and proclaim Jesus for who he truly like at the climactic point of the gospel where Peter openly declares that Jesus is “the Christ” (8:29), there are many records throughout the gospel that demonstrate how misunderstood Jesus was by many who did not recognize him as the Messiah and the Son of God. When Jesus tried to preach and teach in his hometown of Nazareth, he was rejected by many there who were filled with unbelief (6:1-6). Likewise, the Pharisees did not recognize Jesus as the Son of God because they were preoccupied judging his actions in accordance with their tradition and understanding of the Law. Later, when Jesus performs the second of two miracles involving feeding enormous crowds with a couple fish and loaves of bread, he takes the opportunity to teach about the “leaven” (or yeast) of the Pharisees and of Herod that symbolizes their hardness of heart and unwillingness to recognize the truth (8:15).

But it was also Jesus own disciples who had difficulty recognizing and understanding the truth regarding who he was. Even following Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah (8:29), Peter promptly begins to rebuke Jesus for speaking of his suffering and death. Such a drastic display of determination by Peter affirms his misunderstanding of the mission of the Messiah. Jesus’ disciples (esp. Peter) were likely puzzled at Jesus’ teaching concerning his suffering and death, but this depicts the ongoing theme of a misunderstood Messiah in the gospel (cf. 9:32). Who would have thought that the return of Elijah by John the Baptist would have resulted in a humiliating death by King Herod (6:14-29) and then followed by the prediction of a humiliating death for the Messiah (8:31).

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<sup>4</sup> Barry Blackburn sees Mark’s portrait of Jesus as one with primarily a soteriological focus. For him, the Markan gospel is entrenched with the significance of Jesus’ life and martyrdom in terms of the fulfillment of the law and the salvific benefits such redemptive acts bring to the world. Blackburn, “Soteriological Reading of Mark,” 219-233.

These events portray the apostles overall misunderstanding of the Old Testament scriptures, which contributed to their struggle to understand what sort of a Messiah Jesus actually was. It certainly supports the rejection of the Messiah throughout Mark by the Jewish leaders. This seems to be a vital point that the writer of the gospel is trying to make: Jesus was not what the Jews expected in their Messiah, and therefore, Jesus failed to exemplify what everyone was anticipating (i.e., wrongly assuming).<sup>5</sup>

The Gospel of Mark has sometimes been called “a passion narrative with an extended introduction” because a significant portion of the Gospel of Mark is dedicated to the account of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in chapter 11 and extending through the end of the gospel in chapter 16, Jesus travels to Jerusalem where he ultimately is betrayed by the apostle Judas Iscariot, arrested, beaten, and sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate at the unruly demands of the Jewish leaders. From the time that Jesus enters Jerusalem upon a donkey’s colt in fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy in Zechariah 9:9, he does not cease to confront and exhort his opponents to recognize the power and authority that he has as the Messiah and the Son of God (cp. 11:27-33). The Gospel of Mark concludes with the true but astonishing “good news” of Jesus’ resurrection that provides hope for all who believe that he is the Son of God.

### III. MARK 7:1-13

The pericope of Mark 7:1-13 appears to be situated amidst a series of narrative stories centered on the miraculous deeds that Jesus performed in the region

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<sup>5</sup> Perrin seems to think in similar terms in the way that Mark presents Jesus as the Messiah. He says, “He [Mark] wants to prove that Jesus is a kind of upside-down messiah, or more exactly, a right-side-up messiah in an upside-down world.” Perrin, “Where to Begin,” 413-419.

<sup>6</sup> Stein, “Gospel According to Mark,” 1645.

around the Sea of Galilee. These stories of miraculous deeds can be seen beginning from 4:35 when Jesus calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee with his disciples and extending through 8:26 where Jesus heals a blind man at Bethsaida. However, the pericope of 7:1-13 breaks this streak of miracle stories to present a conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders over the behavior of Jesus’ disciples with regard to Jewish traditions.

As Jesus went throughout Galilee healing, casting out demons, and performing all kinds of miracles, the Jewish religious leaders did not intervene and condemn such actions, but when it comes to the obedience of Jewish rituals, 7:1-13 seems to show the concern of the Pharisees and scribes for this particular aspect of Jesus’ ministry. In comparison to all the marvelous displays of power Jesus had been demonstrating, it is interesting to note the censure of the Jewish religious leaders for a simple matter of hand washing.<sup>7</sup> This comparison appears to be conveying the hard-hearted and egocentric nature of the Jewish leaders. Jesus is concerned with helping people whereas the Jewish leaders are concerned with having people follow their edicts. I would even say that a sort of “deliverance” versus “bondage” opposition seems to be evident throughout this controversy between what Jesus is characterized as representing and what the Jewish religious leaders are characterized as representing.

Another connection can be made with the previous section in how Jesus’ authority is challenged in 7:1-13 by the Pharisees and scribes after several accounts of his authority being displayed through the signs, miracles,

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Brown makes reference to the subject that Jewish leaders are concerned with in 7:1-13 as striking when all of Jesus’ former actions and deeds are weighed alongside it. He puts it this way, “Despite all the miracles [that Jesus had performed previously], what specifically bothers the Pharisees and scribes who come from Jerusalem is that some of Jesus’ disciples do not observe ritual purity....” Raymond Brown, *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 380.

and wonders he performed (4:35-6:56). This connection involves a challenge by the Pharisees and scribes aimed at exposing Jesus as a false teacher by denigrating him for failing to teach his disciples proper Jewish rituals. The premise of the Pharisees and scribes can be thought of as, “If Jesus does not teach his disciples proper pious conduct consistent with our traditions, how can he be a true teacher of the things of God?”<sup>8</sup>

The implications of the accusation are that the tradition of hand washing was part of the Jewish religious code and therefore neglect was inexcusable. In other words, to not follow the Jewish traditions was equated with not obeying God’s commandments. The irony that Jesus later exposes is that these Jewish traditions were never part of God’s commandments but the Jewish leaders have always placed them on par with the Law and taught these traditions as part of the necessary duties dictated by God.

Another connection can also be established by the fact that Jesus’ disciples were “eating [loaves of] bread” (Gk. *ethiousin tous artous*) here without washing their hands in light of the miracles of dividing the loaves that Jesus performed in chapter 6.<sup>9</sup> It could be that the writer of Mark was pairing that miracle with the argument in 7:1-13 to illustrate a point about how Jesus not only displayed the power of God in dividing loaves of bread but is also an authoritative teacher of God’s law

<sup>8</sup> PHEME PERKINS also views the Pharisees and scribes contempt of Jesus in this manner, “The implication of the question [posed to Jesus] is that if Jesus does not teach his disciples such rules of piety [such as hand washing], he cannot be a religious teacher.” PHEME PERKINS, “The Gospel of Mark,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 606.

<sup>9</sup> J. R. DONAHUE and D. J. HARRINGTON also see a connection with the food the disciples were eating here in 7:2 and the prior discourse of miracles in chapter 6. They assert, “The plural ‘loaves’ (*artous*) links this dispute with the previous sequence of ‘bread narratives’ (6:8, 37, 38, 41, 44, 52).” J. R. DONAHUE and D. J. HARRINGTON, *The Gospel of Mark* (SacP 2; ed. D. J. Harrington; Collegeville: Liturgical, 2002), 219.

regarding the acceptance of the disciples eating loaves of bread with unwashed hands.

Looking at what comes after this pericope, a direct connection is easily seen between 7:1-13 and the section following (vv. 14-23) where Jesus further expounds the meaning of his indictment of the Pharisees and scribes (vv. 9-13). The authority of Jesus, which the Pharisees and scribes were challenging, is expressly affirmed as Jesus rightly interprets the true meaning of “piety/purity” from God’s vantage and how Jewish traditions do not supersede God’s Law even though the Jewish leaders had artificially placed them alongside the Law and their ancestors had been doing things this way for a very long time. Jesus’ ensuing explanation beginning in verse 14 advocates that it is “inner purity” (true devotion to God) that matters and that what is “outside the body” is not what defiles it but what comes from “within” is what defiles it (vv. 18-23). In essence, Jesus points the issue of purity not toward obedience to Jewish tradition (or even Law commandments) but toward a transformed heart. The Jewish leaders can scrub all they want but they might never be truly pure because of what they have in their heart.

Also, in this follow-up section (vv. 14-23) Jesus turns and teaches the people instead of the Pharisees and scribes. This supports that Jesus’ authority as a teacher was not discredited by the questioning of the Pharisees and scribes and implies that he was a teacher superior to them who declared the things of God rather than the Jewish customs (i.e., the things of humans).

#### IV. SECTION OUTLINE

- 7:1-4 The Disciples’ Offense & Background on Jewish Traditions
- 7:5-8 The Pharisees’ Cavil & Jesus’ Retort
- 7:9-13 Jesus’ Indictment of Jewish Traditions Replacing God’s Law

## V. THE DISCIPLES' OFFENSE & BACKGROUND ON JEWISH TRADITIONS (7:1-4)

Many conflicts in the gospel begin with an accusation against Jesus or his disciples often in connection to some offense they incite among the Jewish religious leaders (cf. 2:18, 24). Specifically, Mark 7:1-13 concerns an offense against Jesus' disciples that the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem incurred when they noticed them not obeying the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating as prescribed in the Traditions of the Elders (vv. 1-2).<sup>10</sup>

Formative Judaism had a code of oral rules that had been passed down from their Jewish ancestors along with the Mosaic Law. These regulations were not part of the Mosaic Law but they were still treated with equal authority and given the same strict obedience as the commandments in the Law by many sects of Judaism.<sup>11</sup> One particular ritual within these traditions was the

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<sup>10</sup> Elaborate washing techniques were invented to ensure ceremonial cleansing in order to avoid accidentally being unclean. "Water jars were kept ready to be used before every meal. The minimum amount of water to be used was a quarter of a log, defined as enough to fill one and a half eggshells. The water was first poured on both hands, with fingers pointing upward, and must run through the arm as far as the wrist. It must drop off from the wrist, for the water was now itself unclean, having touched the unclean hands, and, if it ran down the fingers again, it would render them unclean. The process was repeated with hands held in the opposite direction, with fingers pointing down; and then finally each hand was cleansed by being rubbed with the fist of the other. A very strict Jew would do all this, not only before a meal, but also between each of the courses of the meal." Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (vol. 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 11.

<sup>11</sup> According to Donahue and Harrington, the Tradition of the Elders was authoritative teaching that was handed down orally from teacher to teacher or from school to school. Attestation for this Jewish tradition is cited from the writings of Josephus (Josephus, *Ant.* 13.297) where he explicitly denotes that the Tradition of the Elders was a set of "certain regulations from the teachings of the fathers that were not found in the laws of Moses, and that they were rejected by the Sadducees for this reason (see also 18.12)." Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 220.

tradition of hand-washing (along with other washing traditions, e.g., washing of cups, bowls, kettles, etc.) before eating of food (vv. 3-4). Since Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before eating, the Pharisees and scribes found this offensive and alarming because Jesus' disciples were disregarding an important Jewish tradition that they were supposed to be following as Jews.

It seems that the writer of Mark supplies this background information presuming that some members of his audience would be unfamiliar with Jewish customs. This fits well with the overall tone of the Gospel of Mark as a gospel account with Gentile readers in mind.

The issue of "piety/purity" is at the forefront of the argument raised by the Pharisees and scribes. Contrasting the tradition of hand washing and the violation of that tradition with the disciple's eating with unwashed hands suggests their defilement in the eyes of the Pharisees and scribes (v. 5). However, the issue of defilement is a specific topic that Jesus will later address in more detail in the following section (vv. 14-23). The argument at hand over obeying the Traditions of the Elders brings up a contentious topic that Mark's writer chooses to introduce here following the great works that Jesus had performed leading up to this encounter.

It seems the author's intention is to show forth proof that Jesus is a truly authoritative teacher in the face of disparaging accusations and is superior in teaching the ways of God than the present religious leaders of Judaism whom many looked to for knowledge and authority on godliness and other religious matters. This rivalry is one of the first in the Gospel of Mark to demonstrate Jesus' powerful ministry and to expose the false authority of the Jewish leaders. The next two sections (vv. 5-8, 9-13) will detail the accusation of the Pharisees and scribes against Jesus, followed by a more thorough counter-argument by Jesus against them, and finally ending in the complete refutation of the Jewish

traditions as being authoritatively binding upon the believer in God with the emphasis on the words of God being the commandments requiring obedience and not human traditions.

## VI. THE PHARISEES' CAVIL & JESUS' RETORT (7:5-8)

The main argument of the pericope begins here in verse 5 with the Pharisees and scribes' objection against Jesus' disciples followed by Jesus' prompt response in verses 6-8. Up to this point, it seems that the author of Mark has emphasized the importance of the Jewish traditions by elaborating further upon one particular tradition – the washing of hands before eating (vv. 2-4). This tradition has taken center stage with Jesus' accusers and they forthwith interrogate Jesus concerning why his disciples fail to adhere to this tradition and are thus eating with defiled hands (v. 5). Behind this questioning, though, lies the implication that failing to observe the Jewish traditions is just as culpable as failing to observe the Law. So therefore, what the Pharisees are insinuating is that the violation of the custom of purification by Jesus' disciples by not washing their hands signifies Jesus' failure to lead and teach them in the proper conduct of godliness (i.e., "piety").

Jesus promptly replies to the Pharisees and scribes' denunciation with "You hypocrites!" (v. 6) and then cites a prophecy from Isaiah, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" (vv. 6b-7 from Isa. 29:13 LXX) that aptly describes the disposition and behavior of the Pharisees and scribes. This is the single occurrence of the word "hypocrite" (Gk. *hypokritōn*) in Mark which may be the author's attempt at drawing attention to this unique characteristic of the Jewish leaders and placing it in direct contrast to Jesus. In light of the Traditions of the Elders that the Pharisees and scribes alluded to in verse 5, it appears that the purpose of the Isaiah prophecy is to point out the Pharisees and scribes infidelity to God's

Law. While they might behave outwardly as though they are pious, pretending to hearken unto the commandments of the Lord, they stealthily insert their own ideas and precepts as though they are God's commands. Jesus challenges their criticism by pointing out their failure through the means of a higher authority than the authority of the "elders", and that is, namely, Scripture.

As the Pharisees and scribes sought to castigate Jesus for the behavior of his disciples, Jesus in turn puts the spotlight on them for their failure to properly venerate God and obey his commandments seeing they have replaced his ordinances with their own traditions.<sup>12</sup>

## VII. JESUS' INDICTMENT OF JEWISH TRADITIONS REPLACING GOD'S LAW (7:9-13)

After delivering such an authoritative reproach of the Pharisees and scribes (vv. 6-8), Jesus expounds more fully his polemic by delivering an indictment of how the Jewish religious leaders have substituted God's commandments for the sake of their own traditions. One thing that must be made clear in this argument is that Jesus is not condemning "tradition" itself but obedience to human tradition over that of God's Law. This indictment begins with Jesus' counter-accusation against the Jewish leaders that they have set aside God's commandments in order to hold on to their own traditions (v. 9). Jesus then proceeds to give an excellent example of how this accusation is actually true by explaining the failure of the Jewish leaders to adhere to the commandment of honoring their father and mother (v. 10), as it says in Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16, but instead refuse to help their parents when they

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<sup>12</sup> Perkins also sees the quotation of Isaiah here as introducing "the distinction between outward piety and devotion to God in one's heart" since the Pharisees and scribes were failing to properly reverence God and obey his statutes. Instead they substituted their own ideas in place of God's commands. Perkins, "Gospel of Mark," 606.

have need because they have declared a portion of their wealth that they could have used to help their parents as being “Corban” (i.e., dedicated to God) (vv. 11-12). In this way, Jesus says to the Pharisees and scribes, you have made “void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on” (v. 13).

The Jewish tradition of declaring something “Corban” (Gk. *Korban*)<sup>13</sup> means that the specific item(s) designated “Corban” are consecrated to God and therefore cannot be of use for any other purpose under any circumstance except as an offering for the Temple treasury.<sup>14</sup> Offerings that were declared “Corban” could be food, money, supplies, animals, etc., but whatever was declared to be “Corban” was treated as having been obligated under a sacred vow to be permanently dedicated to the purposes of the Temple of God. It is this

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<sup>13</sup> Another occurrence of *korban* occurs in Matthew 27:6 howbeit in another form than here in Mark 7:11. The word *korban* has two distinct meanings: “a gift offered (or to be offered) to God” and “the sacred treasury.” When reading the contexts where each occurrence is located, it is apparent that the former meaning is applicable in Mark 7:11 while the latter meaning is more applicable in Matthew 27:6. Although the function of *korban* in each of these occurrences is not the same, the connection between the two definitions of *korban* is evident. Gifts given to God are brought to the sacred treasury, or *korban* (which stands in contrast to *gazophylakion* – another Greek word translated “treasury” that included but was not limited to the sacred treasury and offerings to God). In Mark 7:11, sacred gifts dedicated to God like those put in the sacred treasury are the types of gifts that are alluded to in the analogy presented by Jesus. However, fully understanding the meaning of *korban* is deeply rooted in its Hebrew counterpart *qorban* and its occurrences in the Old Testament as well as historical and cultural considerations of first-century Judaism. Joseph Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 355-356.

<sup>14</sup> Perkins also agreed with the specific usage of *korban* as referring solely to the dedication of goods and offerings for the Temple. Perkins specified that to declare things “Corban” is to specifically dedicate them to the Temple of God. She also explained how archaeologists have found the lid of an ossuary marked “Corban” and subsequently states that this finding suggests that the actual practice of declaring things “Corban” was still common during the time of Jesus. Perkins, “Gospel of Mark,” 606.

process of elevating the declaration of something as being “Corban,” which was a human tradition passed down within Judaism, over top of the commandment by God to honor and care for one’s parents as stated in the Law, that violated faithfulness to God’s commandments.

Jesus is conclusively demonstrating the Pharisees and scribes’ hypocrisy by their accusation against him because they have put their own traditions above the commandments of God by not providing for their parents on account of declaring something to be “Corban.” This was the case-and-point of Jesus’ quote of Isaiah. The priority of Jewish traditions had taken over the rightful priority of obeying God’s commandments. For this purpose, Jesus rightfully accuses the Pharisees and scribes of canceling or setting aside the words of God in order to uphold their own.

In summary, this pericope would likely have caused first-century readers to re-examine the authority and conduct of the Jewish religious system but also any other system or institution. Also, if the Pharisees and scribes were shown to not be true teachers of the things of God, then the people would question their practices, and in the end, their corruption and fraudulence would be exposed. This passage probably resounded heavily in the ear of every believer (esp. Jew) in the way Jesus brought out the priority and importance of obeying God’s commandments and pleasing him rather than the Jewish religious system of traditions and rituals. Jesus’ bottom line could be put this way: the believer’s duty is to God above all else.

## VIII. SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION

Mark 7:1-13 finds its way into present circumstances in the church in the way that some pastors view their positions and treat their congregations. Like the Pharisees who wrongly placed priority on the Traditions of the Elders above God’s commandments, some pastors or religious leaders have elevated their position in the church and certain traditions that have



been passed down in the church above what God has said in Scripture. Of course, this is absolutely not true of all pastors and religious leaders, nor is it meant to be a stereotype. But in my experiences, I have noticed that pastors and religious leaders are not immune from, or for some, they do not even care about, lowering the importance of God's commandments in place of another priority that they choose to elevate above it. I have heard of some ministers being more concerned with making a career out of being a pastor and therefore placing great emphasis on being well-liked and prestigious among their congregations rather than on shepherding and leading their congregations to become better followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. They let their desire for popularity and reputation feed what they condone to be the will of God and the lifestyle of godliness. This is much like the Pharisees in 7:1-13. They sought the glory and honor of their positions, the Temple, and Jewish customs above the true teaching and obedience of the law of God.

Situations where a pastor has replaced doing the will of God with the desire to increase the size of their church or becoming financially wealthy through their congregations indicates that following after God has been stifled in their lives by the cares of this world, human pride, greed, materialism, or other contending circumstances. Christian lay people can also get caught up in the hype that such a pastor advocates and subsequently choose to follow that particular pastor or religious leader rather than following the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not to say that Christians should not follow their pastors or religious leaders because Christians definitely should look to these people for guidance but always with caution and prudence.

Pastors and religious leaders are human and prone to error and even corruption, and thus, Christians may be tempted to follow the messages of a pastor or religious leader blindly without personally validating whether or not the pastor or leader is truly teaching the words of God. The Bereans are good examples of how to nobly

follow the teachings set forth by another person. They "searched the scriptures daily" to see if the things they were being taught were true (Acts 17:11). I see Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees in 7:1-13 precisely addressing a lapse in this type of integrity. If the Pharisees had considered the traditions they were teaching and searched the Scriptures, they might have realized their errors and corrected their ways. But they were hard-hearted and had their minds set upon their religious prestige and pride, being more concerned with promoting Jewish traditions instead of humbling themselves and submitting to the commandments of God.

Ideally, a pastor or religious leader serves as a minister for God by pointing their congregation to acknowledge and understand who Jesus is as the Messiah and Son of God and instructing them on how to follow Jesus' teachings (cf. 1 Pet 2:21). Such ministers engender growth and development in their people by first exemplifying and modeling themselves as a true believer who recognizes Jesus as the Messiah and has *also* placed Jesus in the proper place of lordship over their lives allowing this truth to affect the way they live life from the very core of their being. Therefore, there is an important calling for ministers to exhort their congregations to personally model their lives after Jesus himself and to seek to do God's commandments and instruction above all else. But this process must be present and observable from the position of the leadership within the church.

The church today needs to learn from the poor example of the Pharisees and scribes in Mark 7:1-13. When Jesus confronted them for imposing their traditions over top of God's commandments, he said that by doing this they "skillfully sidestep God's law to hold on to their own traditions" (v. 9, NLT). Thus, their worship and service are in vain ("empty") because they have put God's commandments in second place behind their traditions and have not given them the due obedience they require. God looks on the heart (1 Chr

19:17) and is concerned with the true devotion of a person rather than the external rites and rituals they perform and certainly not with traditions that have been set in place of what he desires to be done. Sometimes a person may think they are following God's commandments by doing a certain ceremony or attending a particular group event because that is what the minister said is God's will or just "how we do things". Some people may also give of their finances and resources to a church organization because the minister proclaims that God has commanded this of them (i.e., that they should become poor or that they are supposed to share all their wealth with the church).

Ministers have an influential role in modeling a life that places Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Son of God, in a position of lordship over their lives and eliminates tradition where it oversteps the authority of God's commandments. By setting such examples for the Christians in their congregations and by not allowing pretenses to creep by them, ministers of God will be caring for and teaching in a way that pleases God and brings God glory in a world where people have let many human traditions define what they should believe and what they should do as Christians (followers of Jesus).

## IX. CONCLUSION

Therefore, Mark 7:1-13 teaches that godliness is found only in the eyes of God and not in what men and women think about what you are doing. Jesus taught that it was God's commandments which were being neglected by the false sense of ritual purity the Pharisees and scribes were condoning. Jesus called the Jewish religious leaders "Hypocrites!" because they were teaching their own agenda while covering up God's truth. If we let our emotions or desires for what we think we ought to be doing lead our actions, then we will fall into the same trap as the Pharisees and scribes. But, if we acknowledge and place God's truth in the pinnacle of our lives and let nothing replace it or come before it,

we will avert the same error and wickedness that Jesus condemned. We should be ever vigilant to do God's commandments from a pure heart, being careful to never let our own agendas (or the agendas of another) overshadow or undermine our worship and obedience to God.

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