

## The Problem of Uncleanness--Mark 7:15-19

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Mark 7:15-19 belongs to those passages that are easily misunderstood. People argue that Jesus did away with the food laws and “declared all foods clean.” Mark 7:1-23 reports that Jesus’ disciples were eating bread without having washed their hands. Such behavior was against Jewish traditions as described in verses 3-4. Therefore, the Pharisees and scribes addressed and indirectly rebuked Jesus (v. 5) for supposedly not keeping the law. In responding Jesus did not directly deal with the question his adversaries had asked (v. 6-13), but went to the heart of the matter. He revealed their hypocrisy by applying an Old Testament quotation (Isa 29:13) to them and by relating one of their customs. By way of illustration Jesus focused on the fifth commandment of the Decalogue and its circumvention by the traditions. He showed that the Jews were transgressing God’s law and invalidating the Word of God for the sake of their own traditions, and he repudiated them for such an attitude (v. 7, 8, 9, 13).

Next Jesus addressed the crowds and moved from the transgression of God’s law to the issue of uncleanness and defilement (v. 14-15). This concept was further developed in a private conversation with His disciples (v. 18-23). Jesus stressed that evil thoughts make humans unclean. Whereas in the first part of this longer passage Jesus focused on the law of God, in the second part he wrestled with the issue of uncleanness. When talking to the disciples he combined both. The list of twelve vices reminds us of the Decalogue and other Old Testament commandments, e.g. Lev 18. So in the last part of Mark 7:1-23 Jesus merged the issues of keeping the law and avoiding defilement. Here is an outline of the passage:

### *Introduction* (1-4): Uncleanness

#### Narrative Frame

- (1) Pharisees and scribes versus Jesus’ disciples (1-2)
- (2) Background information on Jewish traditions (3-4)

### *First Scene* (5-13): The Law

- (1) *The Pharisees and scribes* ask (5)  
Direct speech: Question about the violation of the traditions of the elders
- (2) Jesus answers (6-8)  
Direct speech: Old Testament quotation (Isa 29:13) and emphasis on the law of God
- (3) Jesus says (9-13)  
Direct speech: The law of God and an example from everyday life, Old Testament quotations (the 5th commandment in Ex 20:12 and Ex 21:17), and conclusion

### *Second Scene* (14-15): Uncleanness

- (4) Jesus addresses *the crowd* (14-15)  
Direct speech: Uncleanness

### *Third Scene* (17-23): Uncleanness and the Law

- (5) *The disciples* ask (17)
- (6) Jesus answers (18-19)  
Direct speech: Nothing from without can defile the heart.
- (7) Jesus says (20-23)

Direct speech: Real defilement comes from within, that is from the heart and is against the law.

The issue in this passage is not clean versus unclean food. It is eating with unwashed, that is, unclean hands. Jesus is not discussing the *kind* of food that can be eaten, but only the way it is eaten. Jesus is not addressing a biblical issue but a tradition of the elders. The parallel text in Matt 15:1-20 is even clearer. It starts out with the problem of eating food with unclean hands and refers to it again at the end of the passage (Matt 15:20).

Furthermore, the text does not talk about meat, but about food (*bromata*). To restrict it to meat only is to ignore the Greek meaning of the word. The context talks about the bread that the disciples ate (verses 2, 5). “Purifying all food” (verse 19) is a comment by Mark which refers to Jesus. It is not the digestive process which purifies the food, but Jesus declares food clean even if consumed without the washing of hands. Jesus did not do away with the distinction between clean and unclean meat. If this had been the case Jesus would indeed have been a lawbreaker. On the contrary, Jesus wholeheartedly supported the law which includes the Decalogue as well as other Old Testament precepts. They were still valid in his time and are valid even today. Had Jesus abolished the food laws, why would Peter in his vision in Acts 10 have refused to eat unclean meat? An interesting comment on Mark 7 is made by Robert A. J. Gagnon, a non-Adventist scholar:

“The saying in Mark 7:15-19 about what defiles a person is often cited as proof that Jesus abolished the food laws. It is more likely that Jesus intended a hyperbolic contrast: what counts most is not what goes into a person but what comes out . . . If Jesus did not abrogate even such things as food laws and meticulous tithing, then it is impossible that he would have overturned a proscription of sexual immorality as serious as that of male-male intercourse.”<sup>1</sup>

Gagnon claims that Jesus was opposed to homosexuality, because in Mark 7:22 he mentions *porneia* as something that comes out of humans and defiles them. *Porneia* refers to different kinds of sexual sins including homosexuality, sins such as those listed in Lev 18. Since Lev 18 is still valid in the New Testament, as Paul shows (1Cor 5), the law of clean and unclean meat as found in Lev 11 is also not abolished by Jesus.

The main message of our passage is: God’s will is important and must not be circumvented, and the real problem of our uncleanness is our sinful heart which affects our thought processes and actions. Therefore, in Mark 7:15 Jesus moves from ritual defilement to the more important issue of moral defilement and our human nature. This reminds us of Matt 23:23, where Jesus is not opposed to meticulous tithing but shows that it is not enough to pay tithe. There are more important matters in the Christian life which cannot be neglected without suffering harm. The real problem is not with external matters (7:15,18-19) or even external challenges. The issue is our internal dilemma (7:15,21-23).

The phrase “the things that defile a man” (7:15) is repeated almost identically in 7:19 and 23. And what comes out of a man (7:15) is that which comes out of his heart, namely the evil thoughts (7:21). Verses 18-23 are a commentary on verse 15, which is called a parable by the disciples (7:17). This commentary lists twelve things which defile. They are “adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness” (7:21-22) and are referred to as “evil thoughts.” All sins start in our thoughts, and frequently thoughts become acts. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has shown that evil thoughts are already sinful when cherished and not rejected (Matt 5:28). The real problem is our mind which produces thoughts that defile us.

The list of vices in verses 21 and 22 includes three terms that refer to sexual sins and that remind us of the seventh commandment. It also covers the third, sixth, eighth, probably the ninth, and the tenth of the Ten Commandments. In our days, we are confronted with sexual temptations, with violence, deceit, pride, arrogance, and many other sins. It is easy and convenient to adapt to a lifestyle which has become our common culture. It is also easy to make excuses when we have failed to follow Christ's example. But it is still we who make the decision to respond to these challenges and imitate behavior common today or to reject it. As someone has said, we cannot hinder the birds to fly over our heads, but we can hinder them to build nests on them. The problem is our hearts.

What we therefore need is a renewal of our mind. How this can be achieved is not discussed in Mark 7:1-23 but in the following passage (Mark 7:24-30) in which Jesus is presented as the solution to our problems. He is able to drive out our "demons." He is willing to honor our faith and respond to our prayer. Our passage invites us not to look at peripheral problems but to face the real issues, namely our sinful hearts.

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<sup>1</sup>Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Ganon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 69.