

DAY 7: THE BLINDNESS OF RELIGION

Mark 7:1–8:26

THE MEANING OF MORALITY (MARK 7:1-23) This section is built on the foundation of two ideas. The first is the idea of uncleanness. The rabbis of the time considered many things unclean: all human excretions, corpses, carrion, creeping things, idols, and even certain groups of people. Ritual washings were one means of “cleansing” observant Jews from such defilements. The practice of cleansing came from the Old Testament, but many more customs came from “*the tradition of the elders*” (7:3, 5, 8-9).

This tradition is the second main idea here. The Pharisees (but not the Sadducees) accepted the *oral* law, developed by the rabbis, as equally authoritative with the written Law from the Old Testament. Over time, “*the tradition of the elders*” shifted the emphasis from the true intent of the Law, which was holiness, justice, and love, to a myriad of rules and regulations. With astonishing authority, Jesus rejected the entire rabbinic enterprise, calling it hypocrisy, “*the tradition of men*” (7:8), and “*your tradition*” (7:9).

The example of *Corban* illustrates Jesus’ criticism. The commandment of God is “*Honor your father and your mother.*” But the Pharisees sidestepped it by instituting *Corban*, a rabbinic custom in which a person could dedicate goods to God and withdraw them from ordinary use, although retaining control over them. In Jesus’ example, a son declares his property *Corban*, thus denying his parents support in their old age. Once property is thus “dedicated to God,” the scribes forbade a person to change his mind, thereby forcing him to uphold a lesser law (keeping a vow) and annulling a greater law (honoring one’s parents).

Addressing the original accusation, Jesus states, “*There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him*” (7:15). Jesus is declaring that all food is clean, thus superseding the dietary regulations of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. If the Pharisees want to talk about defilement, let them consider what comes *out* of the mouth, from the heart! Morality is a matter of inward purity, motive, and intent, rather than external compliance with dietary restrictions.

THEY WILL SEE THE GLORY OF THE LORD (MARK 7:24–8:10) Jesus now “*arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon*” (Mark 7:24). This region (modern Lebanon) was Gentile territory. There, Jesus encounters the mother of a demon-possessed girl. According to “*the tradition of the elders,*” this individual has three strikes against her: she is a Gentile, a pagan, and a woman. The kernel of this story is: “*Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs*” (7:27). In Jesus’ day, Jews often referred to Gentiles as dogs. The woman’s reference to “*the dogs under the table*” (7:28) shows she understands this. By saying, “*Let the children be fed first,*” He seeks to establish the priority of His mission to Israel. “*Yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs*” (7:28), is her reply. When dogs eat crumbs under the table, they do not deprive the children of their food; they simply eat what is dropped and not retrieved. “*For this statement [says Jesus] you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter*” (7:29). She takes Christ at His word, and He treats her not as a dog, but as a child of Israel.

Jesus travels north to Sidon and then turns south to the Jordan River basin in the predominantly Gentile region of the Decapolis (Ten Cities). On His arrival at the east side of the Sea of Galilee, some people bring a deaf man to Him. The man apparently also has a speech impediment. Isaiah 35:2, 5-6 says the redeemed “*shall see the glory of the LORD*” and “*the ears of the deaf [will be] unstopped ... and the tongue of the mute [will] sing for joy.*” It is unclear why Jesus put His fingers in the man’s ears and touched his tongue with spittle. Surely the cure actually came not from that, but from Jesus’ word. Whatever the explanation for His action, Jesus shows that He treats every person in an individual way, according to his or her individual needs.



The feeding of the 4,000 closely resembles the feeding of the 5,000 (6:33-44). But in the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus brought the Bread of Life to the Jews, and in the feeding of the 4,000, He brings it to the Gentiles. Jesus' prayer over the bread in the feeding of the 5,000 followed Jewish custom, whereas in 8:6, with the use of *eucharistein* (to give thanks), Mark describes the Gentile-Christian form of blessing, from which Christians later derived the name *Eucharist* for the Lord's Supper.

A SIGN OF DISBELIEF (MARK 8:11-13) Having crossed the Sea of Galilee, Jesus is again on the west (Jewish) side. Without warning, the Pharisees are upon Him; they seek "*a sign from heaven*" to discredit Him. Exasperated, Jesus "*sighed deeply in His spirit and said, 'Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.'*" Jesus has demonstrated His divine power repeatedly; He has quite deliberately performed miracles that would link Him to Old Testament prophecies and the Messianic hopes of the people of Israel. The preconceptions of the Pharisees of what God *should* do have blinded them to what God *is* doing in their midst. Indeed, they drive God from their midst: "*And He left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side*" (8:13).

THINK ABOUT how the Pharisees' blindness rose out of their resistance to Jesus; they were determined not to believe. If you have a relative or friend whose attitude is like that, attempts to prove the truth of the gospel may be unsuccessful, and may help harden the heart of the unbeliever. Instead, try praying that God will work in that person's life through other people, circumstances, and events. Be sure that your own love for Jesus is evident in your attitudes and your actions. Don't give up on praying!

THE BLINDNESS OF THOSE NEAR ENOUGH TO SEE (MARK 8:14-26) Jesus and the disciples are in the boat, talking about bread, but they are talking on two different levels. The disciples commiserate about their shortage of bread, while Jesus warns about "*the leaven of the Pharisees and ... Herod*" (8:15). Jesus is warning His disciples about the religious leaders. Preoccupied with other concerns, the disciples fail to understand. Jesus exposes their dullness with His pleas to "*watch out*" and "*be-ware,*" three pleas to "*perceive*" or "*understand,*" and one to "*remember.*" They know a lot about Jesus, but they do not *know* Him. The story of the blind man at Bethsaida provides a clear illustration of the fact that spiritual sight comes gradually and that only Jesus can make us see.

PERSONALIZE this lesson. Spiritual revelation and understanding involve a process. There are times when we, like Jesus' disciples, are confused and uncertain about what God is doing in our lives and in the world. Perhaps right now you feel that you are seeing spiritual truths vaguely, "like trees." Is there any part of your spiritual life that is a struggle right now—something that is particularly difficult to understand about God and His ways? Spend some time talking to Him about it. Ask Him to reveal the truth to you, to help you receive it, to give you comfort and hope, and to help you continue to know Him more intimately.

REVIEW: THE BLINDNESS OF RELIGION

12. What insight did you gain from the Commentary, teaching time, or Core Group discussion that you will long remember?