

## Discipleship According to Mark

*What Defiles a Person* (Mark 7:14-30)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on April 26, 2026

### Introduction

- ❖ One of the challenges we face in our study of Scripture is the difficulty of putting ourselves in the shoes of those who lived so long ago in such a different culture. Mark 7 illustrates that well. At the start of the chapter, Jesus is confronted by Pharisees who are offended that some of his disciples ate with unwashed, unclean hands. And in today's passage, Jesus goes on to address the OT kosher laws and dietary restrictions against unclean foods.
  
- ❖ **Now on one hand, it's not so different from what happens in my house.** My kids come back from school, or come in from playing outside, and the first thing I'm going to say is to wash those dirty hands. Or if guests come over to visit, I'm going to ask them to take off their dirty shoes at the front door. And I would be appalled to serve them dinner on dirty plates with dirty utensils. I make sure to keep them washed and clean.
  - And we might not call it a kosher food law, but cilantro is essentially an unclean food in my house. Because my wife doesn't like the taste. She thinks it's disgusting. If just one leaf is there in the bowl, she'll kindly pass. One leaf taints the whole bowl. Or for my oldest, she's allergic to peanuts. She'll have a reaction. Because of that, she's grown up not liking the smell of peanuts. So in our house, you could say we have food laws. Some foods are considered "unclean" and off limits.
  
- ❖ So on one hand, I feel like I can relate to what's going on in the chapter 7. But, on the other hand, when you dig deeper into their motivation for washing hands or washing cups and their motivation for avoiding unclean foods and unclean people—then you realize that, **for these Pharisees and ancient Jews, it wasn't about practicing good hygiene or expressing personal taste. It was about religious and ritual purity.** Unclean hands and unclean foods weren't just considered disgusting. They were considered dishonoring. And disqualifying. Preventing you from approaching the Holy God of Scripture.
  - Jesus was dealing with a matter of far greater importance. God forbid you walk with your shoes all over my house or you serve my wife a dish with cilantro. But in the end, all is forgiven because it's not that big of a deal. It's just a matter of personal hygiene and personal taste. It might be different in your house, and it's all good. If that's all it was for God's people in Jesus's day, then we wouldn't have a Mark chapter 7. Jesus wouldn't have addressed it. These verses wouldn't be necessary.
  
- ❖ But he did. And they are. **Because back then, God's people were convinced that what you ate, what or who you touched, and what you did or didn't do could potentially contaminate you.** It could make you unclean, and therefore unworthy to approach a holy God. It could drive a wedge between you and God or between you and others. This was a serious matter of eternal consequence. And that's why Jesus often taught on the right interpretation and application of the OT food laws and other regulations of ritual purity.
  - **He speaks to those who feel morally impure and spiritually unworthy to approach God.** He wants to make sure what we turn to for help doesn't just wipe the surface but gets to the root cause and provides a deep cleansing from the inside out.

- ❖ Because all of us can relate to that. **Often we're exposed to certain inputs, or influences, or individuals, and we come away feeling tainted.** Defiled. Morally or spiritually dirty. To the point that we draw away from God. We feel too ashamed to approach. **And then we turn to various solutions to cleanse our consciences.** To remove the shame. But more often than not the solutions are too superficial. They don't go deep enough. They're not radical enough. They're not transformative enough. And we fail to be truly clean.
  - That's why Jesus gave us this teaching in Mark 7. This is why we need to listen. There are three key lessons to take away from this text. (1) Defilement cannot be avoided or managed away. (2) Corruption, not contamination, is the root of the problem. And (3) Defiled is not an insult but an invitation to be cleansed.

### **Defilement Cannot Be Avoided or Managed Away**

- ❖ The first lesson is sobering. It's a stark reminder that defilement is not something you can simply avoid or manage away. That's what we like to think. That if we can just keep our distance from certain individuals or influences, then we'll preserve our purity. We'll stay clean and undefiled. But the lesson Jesus gives to the crowd can be summed up like this: **Defilement cannot be avoided or managed away.**
  - Look at v14, *"<sup>14</sup>And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>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."*
- ❖ Again, remember the context. In vv1-13, Jesus was challenging the validity of the traditions of the elders regarding ritual washings. The Pharisees taught that all serious-minded, devout Jews won't just avoid unclean foods—as prescribed in OT Law—but will also ritually wash their hands before every meal. Along with washing their *"cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches."*
  - In other words, they created these elaborate rituals so they could be hyper-vigilant about not letting a speck of unclean anything enter their body. **And, again, their concern was not about hygiene but holiness.** They were trying to preserve their ritual purity. To maintain their ceremonial cleanness. Because contact with unclean things or consumption of unclean foods makes you unclean (unholy) and bars you from approaching God's holy presence. You'd be restricted from entering the temple, offering any sacrifices, or participating in festive worship on holy days.
- ❖ **But the reality is that daily living in first-century Palestine made it practically impossible for anyone to maintain ritual purity.** Because you were constantly coming in contact with people or things that made you unclean. You take care of a sick family member with a certain disease or discharge—you're unclean. You help bury a relative who passed away—you're unclean. You recently give birth or you're currently menstruating—you're unclean. You prepare a meal for your family where you have to handle an animal carcass—you're unclean. You sit in the same chair that someone currently unclean just sat in—now you're unclean. It's transferrable like that. **So for the good portion of every day, you're probably unclean without even knowing it.**

- ❖ You can see why the Pharisees adopted a strict practice of avoidance, and why they developed an intricate system of ritual washings—for those cases where you simply can't avoid defilement. Because it happened all the time. **It was part of daily life. You couldn't avoid it forever.** No matter how hard you try. You would eventually become unclean. You would eventually get defiled.
  - That's why the OT Law provided instructions, like in Leviticus 11, on how to cleanse your body. To cleanse your clothes or the furniture in your house. So you could recover your ritual purity and reconnect with the worshipping community. And that's why the tradition of the elders was put in place as an extra layer of protection.
  
- ❖ **But here comes Jesus, calling the people to hear him and to understand that their focus has been misplaced, and they misunderstand the point of the purity laws.** They're too concerned with external inputs, influences, or individuals. They wrongly assume our bodies are inherently clean, and so any defilement or impurity must come from outside of us.
  - But Jesus corrects that way of thinking. Listen to v15, "*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.*" In other words, nothing you eat, touch, or do can truly defile you. **Because what truly defiles you already resides inside of you. Defilement doesn't come from the *outside in*. It moves from the *inside out*.**
    - If defilement was from the outside in, then, sure, avoidance would be a great strategy, and all these ritual washings would work wonders. You just might be able to stay clean if you tried hard enough. But that's not how it works. That misses the point of OT purity laws. **Their emphasis on your unclean environment is intended to highlight the unclean nature of your heart.**
  
- ❖ **When Jesus says that nothing outside of you going into you can defile you—he's saying that food laws were never intended to be the solution to keep you ritually pure.** They were meant to serve as an illustration, a metaphor, a parable of the deeper defilement of our hearts and the need for a deeper cleansing that water can never accomplish.
  - Did you notice that what Jesus said in v15 is described as a parable? **In v17, it says that his disciples came to him privately asking about the parable.** Referring to what he said about only things that come out you defile you, not things that go into you. That's a parable? Aren't parables supposed to be illustrative stories or examples that point to a deeper reality than merely what's on the surface?
  
- ❖ Exactly. **All the OT purity laws are pointing you, like any good parable, to a deeper reality that goes beyond the surface.** To the sobering fact that you already *are* defiled. You already *are* unclean and unworthy to approach God. No matter how strict you are to avoid unclean things or how vigilant you are to manage all the rituals, you can't manage away the defilement that's already there in your heart. **We are all born, in the flesh, in a state of spiritual defilement.** It's inherent within us.

- ❖ Friends, this is a sobering lesson for all of us. **In our efforts to stay pure—to keep our consciences clean—we often make the same mistake of focusing on external factors.** If I just avoid those people (those bad influences). If I just avoid those lewd images. If I just avoid that person who gets under my skin. And if I just maintain my religious rituals of going to church on Sundays and participating in community group on weekdays. Then I'll manage to keep myself pure. I'll manage to avoid any defilement.

### **Corruption, not Contamination, is the Root of the Problem**

- ❖ That's wishful thinking on our part. As it was for the people in Jesus's day. Defilement cannot be avoided or managed away. Because it's already there in your heart. That's what Jesus goes on to explain in greater detail to his disciples when they follow up with him in private. There in vv17-23. Here's the second lesson we can draw: **Corruption, not contamination, is the root of the problem.**
  - Listen to vv17–19, *“<sup>17</sup>And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. <sup>18</sup>And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, <sup>19</sup>since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)”*
- ❖ So after they get away from the crowd and enter a private home, his disciples ask him to explain the parable. They still don't understand the deeper meaning and purpose behind all the OT food and purity laws. The parable still confuses them. Like the crowds and Jesus's opponents, they lack spiritual insight. But the difference is that the disciples are still with Jesus. And they're still asking questions and seeking to understand.
  - So he explains to them by being blunt and a bit crass. **He reiterates that nothing physically going into you can truly defile you. Because it can't reach your heart.** Unclean food goes straight to the stomach and right out the other end. It's expelled from the body. In the Greek, it literally says the food “goes into the latrine.” First-century people may not have understood the digestive system to the degree we do now in the twenty-first century. But they knew enough to know what happens to the food we eat and how it doesn't enter your heart.
- ❖ So food items identified in the OT as unclean—like pork or shellfish—were never intrinsically unclean or bad for you. They were just illustrating a point. **The OT food laws were in put in place for the purpose of exposing the intrinsic impurity of the fallen human heart.** And exposing our pharisaical vigilance to stay ritually clean points to that deep desire in all of us to have a pure heart. So, in the end, food is not the issue.
  - That's why Mark includes that parenthetical statement at the end of v19, *“(Thus he declared all foods clean.)”* Later on, in the early church, when the apostles insisted that all foods are clean and all the OT dietary restrictions have been—not abolished—but fulfilled in Christ, they would point back to Jesus's teaching in this passage. This was the moment when his followers began to understand that—while Jesus declared all foods clean—he simultaneously declared all humans unclean. **Our fundamental problem is not contamination from the outside but corruption on the inside.**

- ❖ We're not innocent vessels tainted by external inputs. We're not clean slates who catch the defilement of other people or things. **That kind of thinking—thinking the problem is outside of us— encourages us to blame others or to blame our circumstances.** We play the victim. Other people are the problem.
  - But Jesus turns our attention inwards. Look at v20, *“<sup>20</sup>And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. <sup>21</sup>For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup>coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.””*
  
- ❖ **Jesus's point is that impurity is not something imposed upon us. It's inherent within us—within our sinful hearts.** From within us, out of the heart of man, come all these evil things that defile us, that make us impure.
  - Now when ancients spoke of the heart, they didn't treat it like we do—like the center of your affections and feelings. Which we distinguish from the mind, where your thoughts come from. **No, ancient peoples saw the heart as more broadly functioning as the control center of your entire being.** So all your thoughts, or feelings, or volitional decisions originate from your heart.
    - That's why Jesus says, from out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts. And then he lists **six evil deeds** (that relate to the Second Table of the Law): sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, and wickedness. Then he lists **six aspects of a sinful character**: deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All of these evil things come from within us, from within our sinful hearts. And they defile us.
  
- ❖ What Jesus is touching on in this passage is what theologians would later describe as the **doctrine of original sin.** The belief that humans beings are created in the image of God. But we since Genesis 3, we inherit the sinful nature of our first father, Adam. All of us are born as fallen creatures. We are born sinners.
  - As the late theologian R.C. Sproul put it: **You're not a sinner because you sin; you sin because you're a sinner.** Sin is not merely a wrong thought, a wrong word, a wrong action that we take. No, sin is a condition, a disposition. It describes our nature—our sinful nature.
    - **It's like saying, you're not a dog because you bark; you bark because you're a dog.** That first bark doesn't suddenly make the creature a dog. Barking is just part of the dog's nature. Even if you owned a mute dog who never barked a bark, it would still be a dog.
  
- ❖ **So the point is that we don't become sinners by committing sinful acts. We commit sinful acts because it's in our nature to do so.** Sinning reveals what we already are. That we are sinners born with a sinful nature.
  - **Any parent of a toddler can give you with adequate evidence for the doctrine of original sin.** No parent needs to teach a child to lie, or grab, or disobey. No one sits a toddler down and says, “Okay, today we're going to learn about selfishness.”

- ❖ There's no need for that because sin comes natural to us. Our hearts are sinful. **And it's the sinful thoughts, sinful attitudes, or sinful actions that originate from our sinful hearts that truly defile us and bar us from God's holy presence.** All the dietary restrictions and purity laws of the OT were set in place to reveal this sobering truth. The constant need to ritually wash and clean ourselves—and our clothes and our cups and our couches—the **constant washing is a stark reminder that nothing we do is sufficient to make us clean.**
  - If the roots of the tree are diseased, no matter how much you prune the branches, how much you treat it for harmful pests, or how much you fertilize the soil, you won't produce any good fruit. Not until you can somehow heal the roots at the core. Not until you can heal the tree from the inside out.
  
- ❖ Friends, you can try your hardest to avoid all the bad influences. You can make all the needed adjustments to your behavior. **You can try your best to be the best possible version of yourself. But you will still be defiled.** You'll still feel tainted. Your conscience will still prick you. You'll still feel too ashamed to approach God in all his holiness.
  - That is until your heart is healed. Until it's transformed from a sinful heart of stone to a new heart of flesh. Until you're healed from the inside out. Until then, nothing will fundamentally change in your relationship with God. That's the bad news.
    - **But the good news of the gospel is that God sent his Son, the Great Physician.** Who came to heal the sick. Who came not to call the righteous but sinners (Mk 2:17). Jesus came to address the corruption of our hearts, the source of our defilement. He has the power to change you from the inside out.

### **Defiled is Not an Insult but an Invitation to be Cleansed**

- ❖ But you need to go to him. You need to seek his face. And don't be offended when you hear him say that your heart is the problem. That you have no one to blame but yourself. That you sin because you're a sinner. You've got to face this hard truth. Because the healing you desire is available. The cleansing you long for is at hand. This is where we're helped by the story of the Syrophenician woman. Let's start back in v24. And here's the third key lesson to take away: **Defiled is not an insult but an invitation—an invitation to be cleansed.**
  
- ❖ We're told that Jesus and his disciples traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Two towns in the Roman province of Syria Phoenicia. Long ago, this region once belonged to the tribe of Asher, but for centuries it's been under Gentile occupation. Any Jewish residents in this region would now be largely Hellenized and in frequent contact with Gentiles. **So if you're Jesus and you're looking for a place to lay low for while, you couldn't have chosen a location with a higher exposure rate to ritual impurities.** Unclean people, unclean things, even unclean spirits are all around you. But I think that was Jesus's point.
  - Now I realize, at first glance, it sounds like he was hoping *not* to be bothered by anyone. **And when he's approached by a Syrophenician woman with a daughter possessed by an unclean spirit, I know it sounds like he's annoyed.** Like he doesn't want an unclean Gentile woman begging at his feet. But let's not draw too quick a conclusion.

- ❖ Let's look at what he says and her response. Look at v26, *“<sup>26</sup>Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup>And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.””*
  - Woah, Jesus, let's not resort to name-calling. It sounds harsh, right? I get it. He basically just called her a dog. She's asking for his help. She's heard about his authority over unclean spirits. So she's begging for him to conduct his ministry here in her region, in her town, for her daughter.
  
- ❖ And Jesus essentially compared his ministry to bread and the Jewish people to God's children. And Gentiles, like her, are dogs. **In those days, Gentiles were commonly called “dogs” by Jewish people. In a derogatory manner.** Dogs weren't technically listed as unclean under OT Law. But symbolically, they still represented ritual impurity. They weren't household pets. They were scavengers that fed on garbage and animal carcasses. So they were viewed as common carriers of ritual impurities.
  - **So there's no point in sugarcoating what Jesus said.** He's calling her a dog. He's calling her unclean. Most people probably would've taken offense. They would've stormed off. Surprised that this Jesus they heard so much about could be this rude. But notice that's not how the Syrophenician woman reacts.
  
- ❖ She's not bothered in the least. She's not offended. **Because “dog” wasn't the word that stood out to her. She was fixated on the word “first.”** Jesus said, “Let the children be fed *first*.” Which, to her ears, was sweet music. Because that gives a Gentile like her some hope. If she's patient, if she's persistent, there could be some bread left for her and her daughter.
  - Listen to her response in v28, *“But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.””* She gets it. She understands. Unlike the disciples who don't get Jesus's parable and deeper meaning—this Gentile woman understands who she is in the parable. She's the dog. She's the unclean one. But she doesn't receive that as an insult. **She takes that as an invitation to be cleansed.**
  
- ❖ **She will gladly be the dog in this scenario if it means getting fed by Jesus. Even if it's mere crumbs.** She wants Jesus. She believes he has power to save—to save her daughter from this unclean spirit. So she persists. And she keeps believing. **She doesn't stop pursuing Jesus until she receives whatever he can offer, even if it's mere crumbs.**
  - And listen to how Jesus responds to that kind of faith. Look at v29, *“<sup>29</sup>And he said to her, “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” <sup>30</sup>And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.”*
  
- ❖ **So Jesus's words here reveal that his initial response to the woman—which seemed harsh and rude—was more like a test that revealed the genuineness of her faith.** She didn't take offense when told that she's defiled. That wasn't an insult to her. It was an invitation. And she accepted it. She received Jesus by faith, and he responded by working his power and salvation in her life and the life of her child.

- ❖ Friends, what this episode proves is that God can cleanse and save anyone no matter how unclean you might be or how far from God you might feel. **If this Gentile dog—this Syrophenician woman with a daughter possessed by an unclean spirit—if she was not too unclean or too far from God, then what are you worried about?**
  - What's keeping you from coming to Jesus and experiencing his cleansing, healing power? It's certainly not Jesus. Is it your pride? Are you offended that the Bible calls you a sinner? That it says your heart is defiled?
    - Learn from the Syrophenician woman and humble yourself. **Confess not just your sins but that you're a sinner.** Admit your heart is defiled. And go hard after Jesus. And you'll discover he has far more than crumbs to spare. He stands ready to save you, to heal you, to cleanse you from the inside out.