

Twenty-Second Sunday of Ordinary Time
Gospel Reading **2nd September 2018**

Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Jesus teaches that it is that which comes from our hearts that defiles us

Background on the Gospel Reading

This Sunday, our lectionary returns to Mark's Gospel after a number of Sundays in which we heard the Bread of Life discourse from the Gospel of John. Recall that we focus on the Gospel of Mark in Lectionary Cycle B, but substitute John's report of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes for Mark's report of this event.

In today's Gospel, Mark provides a significant amount of information about the Jewish observance of ritual-purity laws. Most scholars believe that Mark includes this information because his audience includes Gentile Christians who have no knowledge or experience of these laws. We can infer, therefore, that many in Mark's community were not Jewish Christians.

In this Gospel, Mark addresses the question of which Jewish practices would also be observed in the newly emerging Christian community. This was a significant question for the early Christian Church, especially in communities that included both Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity. We also hear this question addressed in the letters of Paul with regard to table fellowship. In Gospel passages such as the one today, we see the Gospel evangelists finding justification for a Christian practice distinct from Judaism in the remembrances of Jesus' teaching and the practice of his first disciples.

Jesus first criticizes the Pharisees for putting human tradition above God's Law. Here, Jesus is referring to the tradition of the elders, the teachings of the Pharisees, which extended the ritual-purity laws of Temple worship to everyday Jewish life. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for making this tradition equal to and as binding as the Law of Moses.

Next, Jesus comments on the meaning behind the Pharisees' language of holiness—clean and unclean. Jesus teaches that a person is not defiled by the food that enters his or her body, but rather by sin that emerges from his or her words and actions. In this teaching, Jesus unmasks a deeper question behind the one posed to him by the Pharisees. The real issue is holiness, which is not found in external acts alone.

Holiness comes from within and is evidenced in the actions and attitudes that emerge from a person's life.

If we read today's Gospel carefully, we will see a pattern in Jesus' teaching method that will be repeated in the weeks ahead. Jesus' first teaching is directed to the Pharisees who questioned him. Jesus' words are then directed to the crowd, teaching that a person is defiled by his or her words and actions, not by the food that he or she eats. In verses omitted in today's reading, we learn that Jesus returned home with his disciples, who in turn questioned him about what he had taught.

The words we read at the conclusion of today's Gospel are addressed to Jesus' disciples. Mark's narrative shows several audiences for Jesus' teaching: his antagonists, the crowds, and Jesus' disciples. As we see in this reading, the words to the Pharisees are often words of challenge. The teaching to the crowds is often a general, sometimes cryptic, message. With the disciples, who often misunderstand Jesus' words, further explanation is offered about his message and its meaning. Jesus' words challenge us as well. In our desire to show that we are holy, we might also give too much credence to externals, following rules without thinking about the intention behind them. Jesus reminds us that we do not make ourselves holy by our actions. Rather, we become holy when we allow God's Spirit to transform us. Our actions should be an expression of the conversion of our heart to God and to God's ways.

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