

The King's Law

The Servant King & the King's Servants: A Study in Mark 1-10 Sermon 8

Mark 7:1-23

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Do you think our problems lie around us or within us? Do you think fixing a nation, a community, or an individual, is a matter of external regulations? Or do you think it requires something else?

All societies across all times have needed to make and enforce laws. Laws are meant to be good: holding back evil and guiding towards harmony and flourishing. In a town like Washington DC, we devote a great deal of energy toward the making and upholding of the law.

But it's worth asking, every now and then, about the ultimate power of law. It's worth asking whether or not our problems lie in legislation, or ultimately somewhere else. Why—after so many attempts across so much time and in so many different places— do people governed by laws (even good laws) not show greater moral transformation? Why, as we become technological giants, do we remain so morally small? Why, as we become legislative experts, can we not legislate becoming truly good?

In our passage today from Mark 7:1-23, Jesus is drawn into a heated discussion about law. It's a discussion that moves from the technicalities of obedience to the depths of good and evil. Jesus doesn't throw away our need for law. But neither does he set it forth as the ultimate solution to our problems. What he does is warn us against its misuse, then invite us to consider where our deeper problems may lie—and what their solution may be.

Let's begin by hearing Jesus' warning—a warning against the misuse of the law.

I. The Misuse and Limits of Law

Misuse of law comes up in verses 1-13, or at least that's how the Pharisees and Scribes see it at first. These religious leaders notice Jesus' disciples eating with unwashed, or defiled, hands (v 2). They interrogate Jesus in verse 5, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands" (7:5)?

The Old Testament Law never requires hand washing before every meal—rather, it calls for thanksgiving.¹ But in Jesus’ day another body of laws had developed alongside the Bible, often called “The Oral Law,” or here in Mark, the “Traditions of the Elders.” These were rules that often pertained to how best to keep the written law in specific situations. The fourth commandment says to keep the sabbath holy, “to not do any work on it” (Exodus 20:10). But what exactly counts as work? Picking up firewood? Milking a cow? Traditions developed, oral law, to help specify how to apply the written law.

However, as can happen with human beings, when we start adding to God’s law, we often end up subtracting from it. This is Jesus’ response to the Pharisees—that in keeping human traditions, they are choking divine purposes. “You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men” (v.8).

The theme reverberates:

Verse 9: “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!” (7:9)

Verse 13: “You make void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down” (7:13).

Jesus says this tendency was prophesied by Isaiah, and it makes one a **hypocrite**:

Verses 6-7: “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you **hypocrites**, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (7:6-7).

Jesus offers a specific case to further his point in vv. 10-12:

For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.”

The word “corban” means “given to God.” Jesus is referring to an act where someone could declare property or wealth as “given, dedicated” to God, which meant it was not available for any other use. This seems virtuous at first. However, people were using it to get out of fulfilling the fifth commandment: “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). This command applied beyond the teenage years; it included an adult child’s responsibility to care for aging parents.

But people wanted to get out of this, for whatever reasons. So, they declared, “corban, my land, or my assets, are given to God. So, I can’t share them with you. Sorry, mom and dad.” And the priests didn’t mind, because dedicating something to God was the same as dedicating it to the Temple. So, priests gladly held someone to their “corban vow,” even when it meant not fulfilling God’s purposes for them to care for vulnerable parents.

Jesus’ first warning when it comes to law: sometimes human tradition can be covering human vice.

A seemingly virtuous tradition of men, can simultaneously “make void the law of God” (7:13) Do we ever fall into this misuse? Do we ever value human tradition, and not notice how it may cover human vice?

My grandfathers were part of what’s been called “the greatest generation.” This is the generation that lived through or around the two great wars and lived through the Great Depression. They fought for their country, worked hard, raised their families, and went to church. They often look at the current generation as ungrateful, lazy, and immoral. But I can remember sitting at a high school basketball game next to one of my grandfathers when he leaned over and said something that was blatantly racist. He’d grown up in the Baltimore-Washington area in the 1930s and 40s; this was how his peers saw the world. This generation was filled with heroes and offer so much great tradition. But we can often value human traditions of heroism and patriotism to cover vice.

Turning now to the younger generation. You may be nodding your head, “Yup, people back then sure were racist. Glad I’m not like that.” You’ve been called the “most awake” generation. You rightly respect people from different backgrounds and places—that are different than you. You’re incredibly aware of the need to honor others, and you work hard to support individual rights and freedoms for all.

But it could be, that in honoring this tradition of individual rights, this generation is covering the oppression of the unborn. It could be that in celebrating this tradition of individual expression, this generation is sanctioning all types of immorality.

Be careful, Jesus says. For human beings have “a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish our traditions” (Mark 7:9). In verse 14 Jesus turns from responding to the religious leaders to addressing his followers. He also addresses another misuse of the law.

From verses 15-23, Jesus explains that it is not what goes into a person that defiles them, but what comes out. Jesus now moves past the “traditions of men” and makes comments that directly implicate how one keeps the commands of God.

There were laws in the Old Testament that pertained to foods and customs. They were important for helping Israel maintain her distinctness amid ungodly cultures. But at the same time, they could present a problem. That problem was that people could mistake outward adherence to God’s Law for inward communion with God. We call this legalism or moralism. And it’s another common problem Jesus was to warn us against.

Do we ever fall into this misuse of the law? Do we ever mistake outward adherence for inward vitality?

Sometimes we can mistake church attendance, church clothes, or saying the creed, for evidence of inward communion with God. But we can do all these things while remaining far from Him. In a heady place like Washington DC, we can build churches around sound doctrine. And in a performance-based place like Washington DC, we can easily build churches around good programs. But why is it that sometimes we see Gospel doctrine without Gospel culture?

Let me ask the members of TFCA: are there places where you are adhering to doctrine, but not showing its effects? Might we sing of the Savior’s mercy but not show it to others? And let me ask the culturally engaged: Are you speaking much for social change, but not showing much character change? Do you speak out for the oppressed, but remain cold toward the awkward, or socially challenged peer?

Jesus levels a second warning to all of us: It is not the external things—like washing hands, keeping dietary laws, or saying a creed—that make a person clean. Jesus is not throwing away the law in Mark

7—we will explore how he upholds it in a moment. But he is getting at its limit—it doesn't seem to be affecting deep change. The law is not making people clean; rather, unclean people are making the law dirty. Neither human traditions nor legalism deal with our deeper problem. For that, we need to turn from our relationship with the law to our relationship with the lawgiver.

II. The King's Law in My Heart

1. Defilement

The word “defile” bookends our passage. It's there in the accusation against the disciples—they eat with defiled hands (vv. 2, 5), and it comes up in Jesus' conclusion, where he summarizes what defiles a person (v.23). “Defile” carries the idea of something being unclean, corrupt, or polluted. It speaks to a condition inside of us. We have almost no concept of this idea when we think about right and wrong today. In our culture, behavior is judged right or wrong solely on external criteria: did it harm someone? Was it fair for others? Was it oppressive? These are crucially important moral categories, all of which the Bible teaches.

But the Bible has an entirely other category that we have no understanding of today: this is the category of clean or unclean, defiled or pure. The Bible often thinks of sin as something that stains us, something that our souls need to be washed clean from (See Psalm 51). The Bible teaches there are things we do that break God's Law, which even if they don't harm anyone, can destroy our soul.

The Bible's vision of morality is about more than being good; it's about being holy. And this is an inner state. Holiness is aligning our nature with God's nature. We don't realize that when we harbor resentment, envy, lust, or hate—even when these things never harm or oppress outwardly, they corrupt inwardly.

A classic example of this comes from Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian is young and dashing. And he makes a Faustian-like deal with the devil: Dorian will get to live however he wants, indulging all the passions of the flesh, and his outward body will never bear the marks of age or wear and tear; but a life-sized portrait of him tucked away in a room will bear all these outward marks. Dorian runs headlong into a life of pleasure. But he's strangely drawn back to the portrait—curious to see the marks. Over time, the portrait not only shows the signs of aging, but it also seems to bear the marks of his lifestyle of sin: it gets darker, is pockmarked, and even looks sinister. “It is the face of my soul,” he

declares finally, “Through some strange quickening of inner life, the leprosy of sin were slowly eating the [portrait] away.”² Near the end, with Dorian appearing perfect on the outside but haunted on the inside, we read: he “felt a wild longing for the unstained purity of his boyhood—his rose white boyhood.”³

Can you relate to this? Are you so disciplined by our culture that you’re denying this deep sense of unworthiness, of uncleanness, of defilement you feel within?

2. The heart

Our problem is not the law, but our own hearts. Notice that the term heart is used three times in our passage (vv., 6, 19, 21). Jesus says that our hearts are the problem—and the things that come out of them:

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....For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (7:15, 21-23)

Unlike many other religions, and unlike many cultures, Christianity is a religion all about the heart. Of course, it pays great attention to the external world—its value, how it and its societies are ordered. But it knows that beneath constitutions and legislative bodies and the rules parents create in their homes, lie human hearts. And while external laws can try to keep evil at bay, they cannot dispel evil from the human heart.⁴

What is the source of evil, the philosophers ask? What is the source of our societal problems, the legislators ask? What’s the source of my problems—is it my family line, my circumstances? Without denying the problems around us, Jesus points us to the depths in v. 21: “From within, out of the heart of man, comes evil.”

Trying to fix this problem with more law, would be like pouring clean water into a dishpan full of dirty dishes and dirty water, and expecting that to make things clean. No, we need something deeper. We need someone to go into our hearts and make them into a spring of living water. And this is what Jesus does.

3. The King's law in the heart

Notice that Jesus' commands that open and flow through the Gospel have to do with heart work.

Command 1: "Repent"

Jesus' first law is that we repent. "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent" (1:14-15). This is a law of the heart. Standing before Jesus, the Holy One of God, a person must truly look within. They must admit their failings, faults, and weaknesses. They must say, before God and humanity, *"I am sorry. I have been wrong. I need God's mercy."* Authentic repentance drills right into the soul of a man or woman.

Command 2: "Believe"

The second law of the king comes immediately after, repent and "believe in the Gospel." If repentance is when the heart bends its knee, belief, or faith, is when the heart reaches out its hand. It takes hold of Christ, saying, *"You are my Christ, my King, my Lord. And I need you. Please don't let go of me. Please help me. I put all my trust in you."*

Command 3: "Follow"

A third command we hear early and often from Jesus is "follow," or "come": He says to Simon and Andrew, "Follow me" (1:17). Here is an act of surrender and obedience. Jesus is now the leader; I am the follower. Jesus now calls the shots, I obey.

This all can be summarized as the law that guides us into a saving relationship with Jesus. And notice the power of Jesus, then, to deal with the defilement in our hearts.

Now notice that the King can actually cleanse the heart. In verse 19, Mark tells us that Jesus is able to declare things clean: "Thus, he declared all foods clean." The term used for "clean" is *katharizo* (καθαρίζω), which means purge, purify, or to clean. From it, we get the English word *catharsis*, which we use to describe strong relief from pain or the cleansing from repressed emotions. This language of Jesus making clean points directly to the cross.

- **Guilt:** It's common to understand the result of our sin in terms of guilt. This is a legal image: we have broken the law of God, and just as if we broke the law of a nation, we stand guilty before the judge. On the cross, Jesus pays the penalty for our guilt: this is called justification.
- **Corruption:** But there is a second way sin impacts us, that the church has also often talked about. And to capture this aspect, the church didn't draw from legal terminology, but organic, or even medical: sin brings not only guilt but corruption—this defilement. We need not only to be justified, but we also need to be sanctified—made clean.

On the cross, Jesus didn't just pay the penalty for our guilt. On the cross, Jesus took on our defilement. He was stripped naked in shame. He was taken outside the city walls to be crucified—because the unclean were not allowed into the Holy City, not during a high feast. The Son of God's soul felt the corruption of ten thousand adulterous hearts, the sickness of the abuser who goes on abusing, the sick feeling of the seemingly righteous mother who harbors resentment toward her spouse; the ugliness of the pastor who works hard to support his pride. All this defilement, that the world will tell you is merely psychosis, but the Bible will tell you is the real state of your soul—all this, and more, Jesus Christ took for you. Why? So that through him, you could stand before the Father, and be declared, "clean."

This is what the law could never do. This is what no handwashing or food restrictions could bring about. The Son of God was sacrificed for the sanctification of your soul—so you will never again be called "defiled," but "clean."

Endnotes

1. "And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you" (Deuteronomy 8:10, NIV).
2. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 161.
3. *Ibid*, 225.

4. What is the source of evil, the philosophers ask? What is the source of our societal problems, the legislators ask? What's the source of my problems—is it my family line, my circumstances? Without denying the problems around us, Jesus points us to the depths in v. 21: "From within, out of the heart of man, comes evil."