

PENTECOST XIV Proper 17 August 29, 2021 St. Alban's Staten Island

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Beginning in chapter 7 of Mark's gospel, we can observe a significant change occurring in the narrative: the teaching of Jesus is bringing controversy and rejection by some. Opposition and rejection are not new themes, but the tension is rising here, and Jesus actually fuels the fire by radical pronouncements which must have been developed for the specific purpose of generating controversy in order to show the differences in approach of those clinging to the old teachings and those open to new ways of looking at things. This time, the opposition is not coming from the scribes but from the Pharisees. And in the narrative following up on this scene, Jesus actually moves into Gentile territory to "exercise his ministry among non-Jews." Between the Jewish and Gentile phases of Jesus' ministry a new element of contention arises in the issue of ritual purity as it applies to food.

The food laws and racial purity were at the heart of Jewish culture and identity. Along with circumcision and observance of the Sabbath, dietary laws served to "mark out the Jews as distinctive people of God, and to separate them socially from other people. Given the fact that sharing meals is "one of the most basic forms of social integration," it is not surprising that these issues were central to what it meant to be a Jew. But this sharing of meals was made "effectively impossible" for Jews to eat with Gentiles. When Jesus raised this issue to a new level of importance, this ritual separation which had become a "badge of Jewish national identity" was elevated to a whole new level of importance.

Dietary laws gained such prominence as a point of contention between traditional Jews and Jesus followers that it continued to plague the early church in its period of rapid growth and potential for further growth. Given the strong position taken by Jesus in today's gospel about the need to abandon traditional Jewish teaching about the dietary laws, it is important to note that his position did not immediately win the day. The "church's remarkable slowness in drawing out the implications of what Jesus had said to the Pharisees ('you abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition') is not to be found by questioning the validity of Mark's interpretation (of what Jesus taught on this subject), but rather in the instinctive conservatism of almost all religious communities, which tends to resist any change to fundamental values until there is no other option." Mark, however, was clearly in "the progressive wing in that debate (favoring abandonment of traditional dietary laws)."

It is also important to remember that the point of dispute was not primarily "one of obedience to the Old Testament laws, but of rules *subsequently developed* in Pharisaic circles." It is unlikely, for example, "that ritual hand washing was yet the norm among ordinary people" in Jesus' time, because that principle (hand washing before meals) had been required only of priests before offering sacrifice and only later extended to everyone. Additionally, Mark's interpretation of the teaching of Jesus on this topic seems to be "directed to Gentile readers of the gospel." We see this in the passage in these words: "for the Pharisees, and all Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands...and they do not eat anything

from the market unless they wash it.” In the view of many scholars this is “a broad-brush, unsophisticated account, which conveys a general sense of meticulous concern to avoid defilement rather than a nuanced presentation of the purity laws” found in the Old Testament. This is because “there is no evidence that the sort of precautions described were yet observed by Jews in general.” However, “it was the observance of such rules which marked out the members of the Pharisaic party from the general populace.” In this context, then, the teaching of Jesus in this passage identifies the obstacle to full compliance with his teachings as the Pharisaic party representing the conservative opposition to his ministry. This points out in stark relief the critical importance of the issue of dietary laws to both practicing Jews and followers of Jesus.

Mark, like Matthew, appears to have had two motives for “casting the Pharisees as villains” in his gospel: “their considerable influence over the people (which) made it difficult to gain an audience for what Jesus taught about righteousness” and the fact that “they had spearheaded actual efforts to persecute Christians and run them out of town (in the latter part of the first century).” Mark appears to believe that “Jesus is not simply a more powerful exorcist than others. His appearance marks, rather, the beginning of the saving intervention of God that the pious had been anticipating for almost two centuries.” But this claim that he was inaugurating God’s reign did not “match the inherited expectations” of what the Messiah would be like. He is “not the angel Michael wiping out demonic armies prior to divine judgment” and the appearance of the Son of Man to judge “the nations is still delayed.” Secondly, Jesus was “seeking out sinners and to make matters worse, himself adopted the path of suffering and death” rather than that of struggle and military engagement with Rome. The issue of dietary laws was never part of the traditional Jewish expectation of the Messiah who would save Israel.

The readers of Mark’s account already knew that Jesus placed other concerns above strict observance of the Sabbath (and the dietary laws) and advocated “the sort of inner moral reform that a philosophically educated audience (in the period of greatest Hellenic influence in Jewish life) might anticipate.” What this meant was that Christians in the first century no longer followed “the pious customs of Jews that were familiar to most people in the ancient world.” But this placed them in opposition to Israel’s leading religious leaders which meant that any potential converts to the way of life advocated by the disciples of Jesus in the wake of the Resurrection and Ascension would have been torn between two powerful voices ---- that of tradition and that of change. We certainly see this play out in the passage here about the dietary laws.

But let’s dig a little deeper here in order to really understand the passage. We should bear in mind, for example, that purity laws in general are put in place in very traditional societies under authoritarian leadership. People are taught to avoid all contact with a person under suspicion (for breaking social rules, for example) “so as not to endanger their own position.” This is “the power in uncleanness...that can cause guilt by association.” Additionally, such rules tended to have a practical as well as a symbolic meaning. For example, in washing one’s hands, it was expected that the person would cup his hands in

order to conserve water in a climate of limited supplies of a scarce resource. The oral law, as developed by the Pharisees and scribes was “not an attempt to bury the commands of God in trivia but to apply the Torah to every facet of life.” Also, to understand the Pharisees we need to recognize that they were attempting to “apply the Levitical laws for the cleanness of priests to everyone,” not limiting the practice to a designated minority of holy people. Further, not only were hands considered dirty and therefore unpure because they had been used to work the soil or cut and sand wood, for example, but also because they had been used for common chores rather than holy ones. That *common* element figured prominently in the rules for washing hands because the concern was **not** about hygiene as we might imagine.

And all of this has to do with *what it means to be a Jew*. It is *a question of identity*, and in human affairs these matters can become far more important than the initial observations of people from outside the group might suggest. Human beings seem to have an inherent need to determine *who is in* and *who is out* in their particular social settings, and this does not appear to be a practice long ago eliminated by a scientific outlook. In some respects, then, the people we encounter in antiquity are not so very different from you and me. If we read scripture in this way, not simply assuming that people from the ancient world were somehow less intelligent, less sophisticated, less able to interpret reality in understandable terms, more limited and primitive than you or me, we will find that certain barriers to understanding an ancient document like the Bible fall away and reveal truths that are lasting and meaningful and worthy of our attention. *Thanks be to God.*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sources:

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