

CLEAN AND UNCLEAN
MARK 7:1–23

Monday — Big Picture Overview (Mark 7:1–23)

Read Mark 7:1–23 in one sitting.

Mark 7:1–23 is one of the longest and most focused debates in the Gospel. Pharisees and scribes travel from Jerusalem—the center of growing opposition—to confront Jesus about his disciples' failure to follow the ritual of washing hands before eating. What starts as a dispute over table manners quickly turns into a fundamental questioning of where impurity truly originates. The passage divides into two parts: a confrontational debate over the tradition of the elders (vv. 1–13), and a teaching—initially in parables, then clearly stated—about the nature of true impurity (vv. 14–23). Mark concludes this section with a significant parenthetical note: through this teaching, Jesus declared all foods clean.

1. Explain in your own words the Pharisees' complaint and Jesus' two-part response. What is the main issue in each section of the passage (vv. 1–13 and vv. 14–23), and how are these two sections linked?
2. Jesus calls the Pharisees “hypocrites” (v. 6)—a term meaning actors or performers. What specific type of hypocrisy does he point out? How does the Isaiah quotation (vv. 6–7) shed light on it?
3. Mark adds an editorial note in v. 19c: “(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)” Why would this have been an explosive conclusion in a Jewish context, and why might its full implications have taken the early church years to work out?

Theological Prompt: Jesus does not just prioritize morality over ritual — he shifts the focus of what causes impurity from what enters to what emerges from within. What does this say about the nature of the human problem as Mark's Gospel sees it?

Practical Application: Where in your own life might external religious practices serve as a substitute for—rather than an expression of—genuine inner transformation?

Prayer Prompt: Lord Jesus, give me eyes to see the difference between practicing religion and living with a heart truly close to you. Search me, know me, and guide me along the way that leads to eternal life.

Tuesday — The Tradition Trap (Mark 7:1–13)

Read Mark 7:1–13; Exodus 20:12; Exodus 21:17.

The Pharisees' program was not cynical. They aimed to extend the purity standards of the Jerusalem temple to every Israelite household — to make holiness tangible and accessible in daily life. Their oral tradition, “the tradition of the elders,” served as a protective fence around the Torah. However, Jesus reveals a dangerous flaw: this tradition has come to override the very scripture it was meant to safeguard. The Corban provision exemplifies this pattern precisely. By declaring his property “devoted to God,” a son could legally shield his wealth from parental claims while still using it himself — and the scribal system refused to revoke such vows even when the son wished to care for his parents. A tradition intended to honor God became a tool for avoiding God's commandments.

4. Jesus intensifies his language across vv. 8, 9, and 13: the Pharisees “abandon,” “set aside,” and “make void” the word of God. What is the significance of this progression? What does the final verb imply about the severity of their actions?

5. The Corban example (vv. 11–13) illustrates a man using a devout formula to avoid the duty of caring for his parents. How does this demonstrate Jesus's point that the Pharisees “honor God with their lips while the heart is far from him”?

6. Every faith community develops traditions beyond its founding documents. What sets apart a tradition that faithfully preserves the living Word from one that has become a barrier to it? What warning signs does Jesus' critique indicate we should look for in our own church life?

Theological Prompt: Jesus defends God's written commandments against human tradition in vv. 1–13, but then in vv. 14–23, he seems to override the written commandments himself. What does this apparent contradiction reveal about the nature of Jesus' authority over Torah?

Practical Application: Are there traditions in your church life or personal practice that you regard as nearly scriptural? What does it look like to hold them with appropriate humility?

Prayer Prompt: Father, grant your Church wisdom to discern your living voice from human tradition. Give us the courage to let go of what has become rigid, and the insight to value what is truly yours.

Wednesday — Lips and Heart (Mark 7:6–8; Isaiah 29:13)

Read Mark 7:6–8; Isaiah 29:13; Psalm 51:10–17.

Isaiah's oracle, originally aimed at the religious leadership of eighth-century Jerusalem, finds a new application eight centuries later in Galilee. The prophet's message is clear: the people praise God with their words, but their hearts are far from Him. Their worship isn't necessarily false out of deliberate deceit—it may be entirely genuine. Instead, it's false because of a structural flaw: outward displays of piety have become detached from their inner meaning, and what was meant to express heartfelt devotion has now replaced it. Jesus fully adopts this critique. The Pharisees' elaborate displays of piety exemplify this kind of worship: committed, vigorous, performed publicly—and hollow at the core. Their religion has turned into a performance, no matter how sincerely it is carried out.

7. In biblical anthropology, the “heart” (Hebrew *lev*, Greek *kardia*) is not mainly the center of emotion but of understanding, will, and moral responsibility—the deepest self. Considering this, what does it mean for the heart to be “far from God” even while the lips praise him?

8. Jesus directly connects Isaiah's prophecy to the Pharisees: “Isaiah prophesied about you.” This typological use of scripture suggests that human responses to God repeat across generations. What does this imply about how we should interpret the Old Testament—and about the possibility that Isaiah might prophesy about us?

9. The charge of hypocrisy in this passage does not require intentional dishonesty. The Pharisees seem to have been sincerely committed to their tradition. How can someone be truly religious and yet be a hypocrite in the sense Jesus describes?

Theological Prompt: The contrast between lips and heart reflects the difference between outer conformity and inner transformation. Anglican worship is deeply liturgical. How does liturgy, at its best, shape the heart rather than replace it?

Practical Application: In your regular prayer and worship, which feels more natural—the external forms or genuine engagement of the heart? What would it look like for you to cultivate deeper interior prayer this week?

Prayer Prompt: O God, whose heart measures all true worship: draw my heart close to you. Let what I say with my lips be the result of a spirit genuinely shaped in your presence, not a performance that masks a distant heart.

Thursday — Nothing From Outside (Mark 7:14–19)

Read Mark 7:14–19; Leviticus 11:1–47; Acts 10:9–16.

Jesus' address to the crowd in v. 15 is intentionally parabolic—mysterious enough that even the disciples cannot understand it without private explanation in the house. The saying challenges a complex system of ritual purity that had shaped Jewish life for hundreds of years. To say that nothing external can defile a person is not simply a practical point; it is a shift in the entire focus of what determines purity. Jesus' private explanation is straightforward: food goes into the stomach, not the heart, and then passes out. The moral center—the heart—is never affected by what one eats. Mark's note in v. 19c emphasizes the significance: through this teaching, all foods have been declared clean. It is one of the most important statements in the Gospel.

10. Jesus speaks in parables to the crowd and explains privately to the disciples in the house—the same pattern as the parable discourse in chapter 4. What does this structure suggest about the nature of kingdom disclosure and the role of the community of disciples in receiving and transmitting Jesus' teachings?

11. Jesus bases his argument on simple physiology: food enters the stomach, not the heart. This is not a Platonic argument (matter is inferior to spirit) but a moral one: the heart is the seat of moral agency, and ingestion cannot influence it. Why does this distinction matter for a Christian view of the human person?

12. If Jesus' teaching in this passage clearly declared all foods clean, why did the early church struggle so much with food and table fellowship (Acts 10–11; Gal. 2:11–14)? What does this reveal about how the Spirit guides the church into truth over time?

Theological Prompt: The food laws of Leviticus 11 served as boundary markers that distinguished Israel from surrounding nations. By relativizing them, Jesus opens the door for Gentile inclusion at the same table. How does the abolition of these food laws relate theologically to the universality of the gospel?

Practical Application: Are there boundaries in your life—social, cultural, or religious—that serve as purity markers, signaling to others that they are unworthy of fellowship? How might Jesus's teaching challenge those markers?

Prayer Prompt: Lord, who declared all things clean through your word: grant your Church the courage to accept everyone you have cleansed, and protect us from limiting your grace by drawing smaller circles.

Friday — The Source Within (Mark 7:20–23)

Read *Mark 7:20–23; Genesis 6:5; Jeremiah 17:9–10; Ezekiel 36:25–27.*

The vice list in vv. 21–22 is not just a catalog of bad behaviors; it is an anthropological diagnosis. Jesus points to the heart—the innermost self—as the source from which all defilement arises. The list is systematically arranged: six plural nouns naming specific actions (such as sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness) followed by six singular nouns describing character flaws (deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, arrogance, folly). Together, they depict a human self that, when left unchecked, produces defilement from within. This is not negativity about human potential; it is an honest view of the human condition based on scripture's own testimony (Gen. 6:5). The passage diagnoses the problem without offering the solution—yet the cure is what the rest of Mark's Gospel focuses on.

13. Compare the first six items in Jesus's list (plural: acts) with the second six (singular: character defects). What does this difference suggest about the connection between character and behavior? Why is it insufficient to focus only on actions without considering the inner life?

14. “Folly” (ἄφροσύνη, *aphrosynē*) appears as the last item—alongside murder and adultery. In biblical wisdom tradition, the fool is not seen as someone lacking intelligence but as morally confused: a wrong attitude toward God leads to an inability to live rightly. How does this view of folly clarify the link between all the items in the list?

15. Jesus reveals the source of defilement but does not specify the cure here. Based on your understanding of Mark's Gospel as a whole, what is God's response to the problem of the corrupted heart? How do the cross and resurrection address what this passage identifies as the issue?

Theological Prompt: If the heart is the source of all impurity, and if the heart is naturally inclined toward evil thoughts (Gen. 6:5), what does this suggest about the kind of salvation the gospel must provide? What is needed beyond moral improvement or behavioral change?

Practical Application: Spend time this week prayerfully examining the inner life described by the vice list. Which items are most alive in you? Bring one of them to God in honest confession and ask for the transformation that only grace can achieve.

Prayer Prompt: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. You alone can accomplish what no ritual can touch. Work in the depths of my heart what I cannot do myself, through Jesus Christ, who bore the full weight of our sin.