

Where Does Evil Come From?  
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Last fall we began a project for this ministry year, for our study time, our weekly sermon time together as a congregation. And the goal was that we would read through the gospel of Mark, start to finish, together as a congregation. It's somethin' that is kind of an odd thing to say 'Ok, that's what we're going to do,' in a video culture that's very media oriented, to say 'You know what we're gonna do? We're gonna come together as a people and we are going to read the scriptures out loud. Not just a little bit, but an entire book together.' And we set out to do that, and it's been a great process. We took a break over the holidays, and we're going to resume it again today. We're gonna get back into that project.

And we're getting into it at a critical point. In fact, I'm convinced that what we're going to look at today, the passage that we're gonna read today, is absolutely essential for us to understand it if the rest of the gospel of Mark is gonna make sense. We're at a critical teaching point. The book of Mark, as you've read it with us together, is a very action-oriented book, telling us a lot of what Jesus did, not a whole lot of what He said.

Today we're at one of those critical places where we'll have something He said. And it is so important that He told the people around Him to gather round. He says, 'All of you—listen and understand.' This is a critical teaching we're gonna look at today. In fact, I think it's one of the most distinctive elements of Christ's teaching, and we need to understand it. So my goal today is gonna be on the understanding level. My goal is that you'll walk out of here today understanding what Jesus said. It won't be complicated. It won't take us long to do it; primarily just slowing down and looking at it will help us to have clarity and accuracy with respect to it. And so that's what we're gonna be doin' today.

This is not a highly emotional text. This is not one of those that's gonna have you walking out of here feeling very inspired. It's actually kind of a sobering one. But it's a truth we need to have, we need to grasp, we need to understand if the rest of the gospel of Mark is gonna make sense, if your life is gonna make sense. In fact, I'm convinced you'll never know the joy, the wonder, the glory—in a transforming way—of Jesus unless you grasp this truth. Ok? That's where we're headed.

We can put the framework to it. There's a question that Jesus is gonna answer in our text today. And it's a question we wrestle with often. And the question is this—where does evil come from? Now He's not gonna be talking in the ultimate philosophical level here. He's gonna be talking very practical, very immediate...those things in our life that show up in the newspapers, and around us, and in our own experience all the time—things like murder and theft, and immorality and adultery, and deceit and slander, and pride and envy and coveting, and sensuality. Those are all the types of things He will name in this text. And the question He'll be asking is 'Where do those come from? Where do those things, those foul words, those ugly actions, those bad attitudes that surface in our lives and the lives of those around us...where do they come from? What is their source?' He's gonna answer that question. And remember, not in a grand, ultimate, philosophical sense, but in a practical sense where you and I live now, today.

He's gonna answer that question in Mark 7: 1-23, and I'm gonna encourage you to go ahead and open your bibles to that passage. We'll be reading through it together in just a moment. We'll progress through three steps as we read, just so you have a sense of the flow as we go through here. That often helps me when I read, to know that ok, where is all this going. The first thing we're gonna do is we're gonna have a religious confrontation—the examiners, the religious authorities from Jerusalem, the Pharisees committed radically to keeping every law of God, and the scribes who are to preserve the law, and wrote it and copied it as a profession—they will come from Jerusalem to investigate Jesus, to examine Him. And it's at the height of His ministry. People are being healed just by touching the hem of His garment as He walks by. I mean, it's an amazing, phenomenal time in His ministry; crowds are gathered around Him; and these men come to examine Him. And there's a confrontation between Jesus and these examiners.

After that there will be a very short section. This is so short we'll fly right by it if we don't...if we're not careful. It's a...He gives a parabolic instruction. A parable's like a riddle; it's a little word picture. And He will give that to the crowds. After He's had the confrontation He will say something to the crowd. He will give them a little word picture. It's really not that hard of a parable to figure out. But His disciples struggle with it.

And so, after that we'll have a quiet moment where there's a plain explanation. He doesn't use the word picture; He just sits down with His disciples and He says 'This is what I mean by that word picture.'

So that's the flow of it. A couple of notes by way of background so we read through it, you'll have an understanding, and I won't have to stop and explain it as we go. Just so you have an idea of some of the historical background here, a couple notes. Number one is there'll be a contrast made between the commandments of God and the traditions of the elders. And you're gonna kinda wonder what were those traditions of the elders? We kinda know what the commandments of God are...I mean, those are the scriptures; and in this case we're talking specifically about the Old Testament—the Law of Moses given by God at Mount Sinai, and given then to the people of Israel...the 600 and some commandments including the ten great ones. And then the rest of the Old Testament was gathered around that. We understand that would be the commandments. The traditions of the elders, however, were something different. The commandments were written—the traditions of the elders were applications that the teachers and the elders of Israel, the leaders of Israel, made of those commandments. See, the commandments were in fairly general terms.

Example: You'll keep the Sabbath; you will not work on the Sabbath. That's a pretty general concept. Well, the elders and the rabbis and the teachers said 'Ok, if we're gonna do that, we need to be pretty precise here. We need to be precise about defining the Sabbath—exactly when does the Sabbath begin and when does it end? How many minutes before sundown do we say it's Sabbath? And how many after sunrise do we say it's done? And work? What exactly is work and what is not?'

They wrestled with those kind of questions. And they began to build an oral tradition that went along with the written commandments. In fact, the oral tradition was set up as almost...they called it a 'fence' around the commandments. The idea was, 'if we build a really good tradition, and it's really precise, it will keep you and it'll stop you...it'll stop you from ever crossing the line into breaking one of God's commandments.' For example, 'if we know...if we know that you shouldn't use the Lord's name in vain, then we'll add a tradition. The tradition will be this...we won't ever say His name. That way, you'll never break the command. You'll speak of God, you'll speak of the Almighty, you'll speak of the All-Powerful, you'll speak of the All-Wise, but you'll never say Yahweh. As a result, you'll never break the command.' And so the elders build these traditions around the Law, so they were sure they could keep the command. By the time Jesus came, that oral tradition held equal weight with the written Law in people's minds.

That's the situation that we have in the background of this particular passage. An example of some of the tradition related to washing of hands. The written commands of God indicated that the priests, before they made a sacrifice, at certain points would go through a ceremonial washing of their hands to indicate the purity of their lives as they approached the sacrificial moment. Well, the traditions that built up around that pretty soon had it that you know what? If it's a good thing for the priests to wash their hands before they offer a sacrifice, it oughta be a good thing for all of us to always wash our hands when we're touching things that may be contaminated by sin. And so the Jews developed a habit of washing before they ever ate bread, or before they...after they came back from the marketplace and they may have touched somebody or picked up something in the store, or maybe...they didn't shake hands back then, but maybe they 'high-fived'...I don't know. ☺

They'd come back and they'd wash their hands if they'd been out in public. They would wash their utensils, and they would clean them. And none of this would have anything to do with hygiene. It had nothing to do with disease prevention related to germs. It was all about making sure you didn't touch something that some sinner had touched, and be contaminated by their sin. Ok?

Another thing they had, another tradition, was the practice of *corban*. And the idea here was it's a really good thing to dedicate things to God. In fact, we're called to do that in the Old Testament, to make dedicatory sacrifices. If that's a really good thing to do, there ought to be a couple ways to do it. And one of the things that's a challenge, if you're going to dedicate something to God you never get to use it again. And so you developed a tradition that got around that problem a little bit. Because you could declare something that you had, a possession, maybe...maybe it was a real prize ox that you just loved, and you really wanted to sacrifice it, but not right now. You wanted to use it, pulling the plow for a while and some other things. And so what you would do is you would declare that ox dedicated to God. And then you could use it for as long as you wanted until finally, when you no longer had a use for it, you could sacrifice it. During the time, nobody else could buy that ox from you; nobody else could use that ox; nobody else could...you couldn't give it away to somebody else, because it was goin' to God. But you could use it in the interim. That was a practice they had, a tradition that the elders had developed. So that's in the background of this passage.

The last thing you're gonna see the word *defiled*. And defiled...you're gonna see that word appear a number of times. It's not a word we use commonly. The New International Version will use the word 'unclean.' The idea is simply here is something that is pure...is become dirty. 'Polluted' is a word that would fit well in our understanding...something that is pure suddenly has impurity in it. Something that was clean is now dirty. Something that you could pick up and drink because it was good, clean water...you wouldn't touch it now because it's foul and it stinks.

That's the background you need. Let's start reading the text. We'll start with the religious confrontation...Mark 1, beginning at verse 1, we've got the examiners will be here... Excuse me, chapter 7, verse 1. Let's start our reading. It says

*The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, and they had seen some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders. When they had come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.)*

*The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples...why are your disciples...why are they not walking according to the traditions of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?"*

*And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah..."*

...the Old Testament prophet...

*"Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written..."*

...and here He quotes Isaiah's prophesy as applying to this generation of leaders; He says

*'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'*

*"Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men."*

*And then He was also saying to them...*

...and that wasn't all He said. He went on; He says...

*He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For..."*

...and now He's going to give a specific example. He says...

*"For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother'; and 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say (this is what you say), 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is, it is given to God),' you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother,"*

...it's all dedicated to God, not them...

*"...and thus you're invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many such things."*

This is just an example. That's the confrontation. He now moves to the crowd. And He'll say to the crowd...

*He calls the crowd to Him again, and He began saying to them,"*

...the crowd that He's called together...

*“Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.”*

*And when He left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about that parable.*

We've got the parable; now we're gonna have the explanation and word picture. The disciples questioned Him about the parable,

*And He said to them, “Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from the outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart but into his stomach, and is eliminated.” (Thus, by the way, He declared all foods clean)*

...ok to eat. You can eat that maple bar. That's editorial—it's not in the text.

*And He was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit and sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”*

It's not a complicated text here. It's not complicated. Question—where does evil come from? Answer—Jesus' own words: all these evil things proceed from within and defile the man. They all come from inside you.

See, He's tellin' this crowd at that time that the problem is not the rigid Roman rule that has its oppressive grip on Palestine right now, with its oppressive taxes and its military army maintaining order. He's likewise telling these people that, 'You know what? The problem is not the corrupting influence of the Greek lifestyle that is taking us far away from our old ways. Neither...' He indicates, '...is the problem our pagan neighbors and their idolatry, and the perversions that seem to rub off on us. Neither...' He says, '...is it the compromises of our countrymen, the rulers that have made peace with the Romans and gotten rich off that. And definitely...' He's indicating, '...the problem is not unwashed hands. The problem is a problem of the heart.'

Now, the specific instance that has really brought that to the forefront are the Pharisees and the scribes. I mean, they have done a really horrible, horrible thing. They have taken the commandments of God and pushed them aside so that people weren't even keeping the commandments anymore, in order to keep the traditions they were giving them. In other words, these Pharisees and these scribes were teaching the people to do religion their way rather than follow God. That is a horrible evil! A horrible evil. They were teaching a whole nation to ignore the laws of God in order to do things the way *they* said it should be done. It's a horrible evil! And Jesus is very clear as to the source of that evil. He says it earlier in the text when He cites Isaiah and says 'This is the way you are. Your hearts are far from God.' The problem's in here [*points to heart*].

And it's the same for all of us. Whatever form our impurity takes, it doesn't enter from the outside. It flows from the inside out. Food doesn't cause gluttony. Pornography doesn't cause immorality. Abundance doesn't create greed. Inequality does not cause envy. Harsh words do not cause anger. All those foul words, wrong actions, and rotten attitudes flow out of the very core of who we are. You gotta understand it. The education system is not the problem. Our political system is not the problem. Economic conditions are not the problem. Eroding social standards are not the problem. Broken families are not the problem. False religions are not the problem. The problem is our hearts—my heart and your heart. That's where evil comes from. That's where the pollution of our lives flows from.

There's one simple application at this point. It's not hard to see the point Jesus is making. You say, 'Well, what are we supposed to do with that?' And the only application given in this passage, the only directive given, the only instruction we're told at this point, is *“Listen, all of you, and understand.”* Get a grip on this—personal, not abstract; personal. See, nothing else in the Christian life will have any meaning to you if you don't start here.

You wonder why the Christian life may be boring for you, why there's less joy than you thought there ought to be, why there's a general apathy to your concept and understanding and practice of Christianity. I trace it right back to a weakness of understanding at this point.

Maybe you're on the outside looking in, and you're saying, 'I really don't see a need for this Christian stuff. What's Jesus got for me? I don't see. I've got a good life goin'!' You don't understand this yet.

If you will not grasp this point you might as well close the book of Mark, 'cause the rest won't mean anything to you. As you read on you won't understand why it is Jesus didn't overthrow the Roman government. You won't understand why it is Jesus didn't set up a healing clinic and heal everyone in Palestine at that day and at that time. You won't understand why it is Jesus didn't set up a great educational situation at a university and open it and provide a universal education that would transform everybody at this great university. You won't understand why Jesus didn't set up a throne in Jerusalem and say, 'I rule!' You won't understand why He went to the cross and died if you don't understand this.

All that is wrong in this world is rooted in what's wrong in your heart. Evil flows from within. The world doesn't pollute us; we pollute it. We struggle with that. Basically Jesus looks at us when we come to Him, and the first thing He says to us is, "You are a sinner." And we hesitate at that; don't.

Jesus goes on from here. And I wanna take us just a step further in the story. Jesus goes on from here. We're told that He got up...

*...and He went away to the region of Tyre...*

This was a Gentile region. He'd been ministering long and hard in Palestine among the Jews. And it's like He's taking a break; He's moving away; He's gonna take a rest stop, as it were. And He moves out of that region of ministry. And we're told that when He came to Tyre He entered a house, and He wanted no one to know it; He could not escape, however. We're told that a woman, after hearing of it, came and fell at His feet. Her little daughter had an unclean spirit. And immediately she came and fell at His feet, in this Gentile region, as Jesus is just trying to get away and be alone.

And we're told how the woman was a Gentile of the Syrophenician race; and she wasn't among the Jews that Jesus was presently ministering among. But she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And He was sayin' to her, "*Let the children be satisfied first, for it's not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.*"

And you hit that point in the reading, and there's this pause. Did He just call her a dog?!? Did He just call her a dog?!?

Many take offense on her behalf at this point. They see it as an ethnic slur that has just been uttered. The line of correctness has been crossed. And they argue that we should not react any differently here than we would if one of our political leaders or radio personalities or public celebrities or religious leaders crosses the line of correctness. Jesus should be both challenged and questioned at this point. *He just called her a dog!* Indirectly, but He did it.

Still others will rush to His defense at this point. They'll point out, for example, that the Greek word here for 'dog' is not as harsh as some other words. It's like calling her a puppy; He's not calling her a cur, or a mutt, or a mongrel.

Still others point out that the statement really is just a simple word picture meant to communicate the fact that there was a sequence to Christ's ministry—that He'd been sent to deal with the Jews first, and then get to the Gentile ministry. And there's just a sequence He's tryin' to follow. And He's taking a break; and it's just a simple word picture that we shouldn't take personally; just communication. And further, they'll point out, and rightly so, we don't know the tone of voice here. The written word doesn't give us the all-important tone of voice. Were these words spoken in friendly banter? Were they spoken in gentle delay? Or is there an irritated curse implied? Without some contextual clue to the tone, we're hard-put to come up with a real clear evaluation here.

The debates around this statement play out in the commentaries like the editorials and the blogs in our day, when somebody crosses the line of correctness. The fact of the matter is, there *is* an edge to this statement. Jesus often made statements that had an edge to them. He called the Pharisees in this passage hypocrites. He all but called His disciples dimwits. And He does speak of her indirectly as a dog. A word picture, but somebody could take offense at it.

But she does not. And that's the important part. That's why this story is in there, 'cause we need to see how she responds. Instead of taking offense, she agrees. She says to Him, "Yes, Lord." She doesn't debate it; she doesn't argue it; she just simply says 'yes', and presses on with the request, convinced that with Jesus there will be more than enough grace for her. She doesn't debate the statement. She says

*"Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs."*

She doesn't complain that the line of correctness has been crossed and walk away angry, indignant and offended. She affirms the statement and speaks with faith. And look at Jesus' response—very specific here. He says

*“Because of this answer go; the demon has gone out of your daughter.”*

And the text goes on to tell us that she went home, and she found her child lying on the bed, the demon having left.

Jesus says we are the problem. Jesus says evil comes from in here. Jesus says you're a sinner. You can be offended by that; you can debate it; you can argue it. Or you can simply say, “Yes, Lord. Have mercy on me. Have mercy on me.”

Let's stand.

*Our Father,*

*Sometimes the commands of Jesus are not complicated, and we recognize that today. We've simply been called to listen and to understand. As we leave here today, Father, I pray and I ask that having listened, You would now grant us understanding, You would give us the minds to grasp, and the hearts to hold the reality that we're the problem.*

*In Jesus' name, amen.*