

Mark 7

Introductory Comments

1. By the end of Mark 6, we have seen a clear delineation of several of the soil types referred to by the Parable of the Sower. The good soil is those who have been healed. The rocky soil is the disciples, who started off positively but who have recently been referred to as experiencing a “hardening of their hearts.” And the thorny soil is for people like Herod, who show promise and exhibit a willingness to “hear,” but who, in the end, fall victim to influences that squelch the possibility of their faith bearing fruit.
2. Chapter 7 continues a series of healing/controversy stories that appear between two miraculous feeding stories (the feeding of the 5000 in Mark 6:35-44, and the feeding of the 4000 in Mark 8:1-10). Once again, the Pharisees reaction to Jesus emphasizes their soil type (“hardened path”) and allows Mark to reiterate his theme from 2:15-3:6 - that people do not exist to serve the Law, but the Law exists to serve people.
3. The latter two healings of the chapter (the Syrophenician woman and the deaf man) include some peculiar details, some of which have puzzled scholars and commentators for generations. When seen in the context of Mark’s greater narrative, however, the episodes are much less confusing.

Questions and read Mark 7

Discussion Questions

1. **What is the overall point of the extended controversy in 7:1-23?** *The fundamental point of the proceedings is that the heart is the basis of good or evil, not outward custom, appearance, or ritual (which echoes the principle expressed in Mark 2:15-3:6 that law, custom, and ritual must be adapted to the needs of the people in every new situation. **How many times does Jesus make his argument?** Three times. First, in his diatribe against the Pharisees and scribes (7:1-13). Next, he calls the crowds to “hear me, all of you, and understand,” telling them that human defilement comes from within, not from the outside. Finally, in a third repetition to the disciples who ask him privately to explain (as they did with the Parable of the Sower in 4:10) Jesus amplifies and concretely illustrates the same point once more.*
2. **Why do you think Jesus repeats his argument three times, ending with the misunderstanding of the disciples?** *It serves two functions. First, since the audience probably does understand the issue, the fact that the disciples do not augments the distance between the audience and the disciples and provides the narrator an opportunity to have Jesus underline that distance with, “Then are you also without understanding?” (7:17). Second, the fuller explanation to the disciples serves as a waiver to Jewish custom and allows discussion instead on the ramifications for dietary regulations (which was an explosive issue in*

the early Christian community). As the narrator remarks in an aside, Jesus' words declare all foods clean (7:19). From Paul's letters and from Acts, it is evident that the early communities were plagued by problems of table fellowship and eating regulations. All the stories about eating and the Law imply the critical nature of that issue for Mark and his audience. For Mark, one's heart is the ground of good and evil, God or Satan, faith or fear. If the heart is God's ground, nothing else is required; if the heart is not God's ground, nothing else will suffice.

3. **What is the pattern for healing as exemplified by the Syrophenician woman story?** *The Gentile woman **hears** about him, comes and falls down at his feet, begging him to heal her daughter, which is exactly the same pattern most recently exhibited by the Jewish synagogue leader, Jairus (cf. 5:6, 22-23).*
4. **How does Jesus' reaction to her connect with what happened earlier in chapter 7? What do you think Jesus is doing in this encounter?** *Jesus has already demonstrated that Jew and Gentile are all same in God's eyes and are all welcome at God's table. He has already healed a non-Jew (the Gerasene demoniac), so we know that nationality is a non-issue. So why all the disparaging remarks about being a "dog" and not being worthy of the "children's bread"? Jesus' response functions on two levels. First, his rebuff provides the opportunity for her faith to be fully revealed, for she takes his metaphor and turns it back on him: "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (7:28). He agrees and tells her to "go," for her daughter is healed. By faith, Gentiles too can share "the children's bread." Table fellowship is not related to nationality, sex, or religious tradition; all those who respond in faith share "the children's bread." Second, in his disparaging remarks Jesus is voicing the prejudices of the culture of that day, and then showing them for the folly that they are. Mark uses this interaction to place into sharper relief the reality that good soil has nothing to do with nationality, sex, or religious ancestry. It is the heart that determines the soil of a person.*
5. **In 7:32-35, why do you think Mark provides such a strange method for Jesus to heal the man? Can you sense that Mark is setting something up in terms of the story?** *This one also functions on multiple levels. The man suffers from inability to hear and speak. But in his encounter with Jesus, he regains those faculties. And like the good soil that reproduces of itself, he (like everyone else who receives healing) rushes out to zealously share the news. Despite Jesus' insistence on silence, those who are healed (the good soil) simply cannot help but tell everyone. On another level, this more elaborate healing is an initial indication by Mark that Jesus is not able to effect healing as readily as before. Mark is clear that the reason for this has nothing to do with Jesus' power, and everything to do with the proliferation of poorer soil quality as the Gospel narrative proceeds. As we have seen, the news of Jesus' healings and ministry inspires many, but it also draws the attention of those with malicious intent. We are near a turning point, and while there are yet a few more*

miracles and healings to be presented, hardness of heart and increasing resistance are on the advance.

- 6. What is Mark emphasizing with the repeated refrain of Jesus telling people to stay quiet but no one listening?** *Jesus' attempts to hide himself, prevent his name from becoming known, and avoid crowds are all doomed to failure; yet such failure is precisely what the proverbial sayings after the parable of the Sower posited as the purpose of secrets: "For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light" (4:22). Jesus' commands to silence, his evasions of crowds, and his private teachings are not finally intended to prevent the spread of his word or knowledge of who he is from reaching the people. Jesus knows the word will spread. But Mark uses the failed requests for secrecy to amplify the tension. Secrets come to light, and commands to silence provoke preaching, but that light and that preaching also bring with them an inevitable increase in opposition and hostility: faithlessness rises to confront faith.*

For next session, read Mark 8:1-9:1