

## 22<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B) Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, & 21-23

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Mark 7:1-8, 14-15 and 21-23. This text contains an important teaching regarding the role of religious practices and defilement. Although the immediate controversy involved the ritual purity regulations of the Scribes and Pharisees, this instruction is an enduring teaching for all Christian disciples. Let's study this text to see what lessons we can learn for our discipleship.

The first lesson Jesus teaches is an instruction on the nature of religious laws and regulations. It is important to remember that Jesus does not discard the Law of Moses, but rather establishes a certain prioritization within it. Laws and regulations have the purpose of safeguarding and protecting what is good for us. Some rules promote the good by requiring certain actions while other rules protect the good by restricting certain actions. In order to understand how to properly interpret and apply various regulated practices, it is always necessary to remember the ultimate good being promoted or protected by those practices. Laws and regulations are meant to serve as external checks and balances that indicate a proper interior disposition. When a person is in violation of a law or regulation, they should question whether their actions are still promoting or protecting what is good. In this passage, the purity laws were meant to foster holiness that promoted communion with God and neighbor. However, when those practices became absolutes in themselves, they no longer served their intended purpose. Rather than becoming a source of communion, those same regulations became a cause of division. Christianity has regulations for its life and discipleship as well.

The Great Commission for the Church is to communicate the living gift of faith through history. This divine gift of the living faith reality is known as Tradition (*Note capital "T"*)-a word that means "that which is handed down". The great Tradition of faith is articulated and fostered by various traditions (*note the small "t" used to indicate expressions and practices*) that promote and protect the living gift of faith itself (Tradition). These individual practices (traditions) may change somewhat in their external forms, yet continue to communicate the same essential reality (Tradition). For this reason the Church states that, "The Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on Earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything, until she is brought finally to see Him as He is, face to face." Sacraments such as the celebration of Mass and Confession, have been an essential part of the Christian faith since the time of Jesus, yet the actual way in which those sacraments have been celebrated (that is, particular vestments or other ritual regulations) has varied at different times. When regulations become emphasized more than the essence of faith, we are in danger of falling into rigid legalism. When regulations are discarded without consideration for their formative value, we are in danger of losing important safeguards and encouragements for Christian discipleship. In order to develop into mature discipleship, it is important to know both the essence and the expression of religious laws and practices. Only then can they fulfill the purpose for which they were given: greater communion with God and neighbor.

- *How can rigid legalism undermine authentic discipleship?*
- *How can the casual discarding of religious regulations (libertarianism) obstruct growth in authentic discipleship?*
- *What helps you understand the difference between the essential nature of faith (Tradition) and the particular expression of faithful practices (traditions)?*
- *How do these two understandings complement each other? What happens when someone tries to conserve the Tradition without traditions?*
- *What happens when someone tries to conserve the traditions without a love for the Tradition?*

The second lesson Jesus teaches concerns the danger of mistaken priorities. Our Lord makes this caution by quoting the Prophet Isaiah when he says, "In vain do they worship me teaching as doctrines human precepts (see Is 29:13). Jesus does not criticize human precepts in themselves but only when divine status is given to them. When that happens, it can be easy for disciples to substitute daily practices for true and authentic devotion to God. It can also become tempting to esteem certain practices in such a way that we actually look down on others who do not follow those same practices. Finally, when we confuse human precepts with divinely revealed doctrines we are in danger of disregarding the priorities God has given us in favor of the priorities we want, which are always of lesser value. The Scripture verses not included as part of this Sunday's Gospel reading indicate a particular example by which the Pharisees and Scribes allowed exceptions to the divine mandate to honor one's father and mother in favor of created human exemptions. In this action, the Scribes and Pharisees are accused of not only violating God's will but of actually disregarding it. It is important for us as disciples to know the difference between what is divinely inspired and what is humanly expressed or legislated. Such knowledge is never a license to disregard what is humanly expressed or legislated, but rather an encouragement to properly interpret and apply it in particular circumstances. When rules and practices become a weapon with which we attack or condemn others, we have violated the greatest Law God gave us: to Love God and our Neighbor.

- *What religious reasons can people use to exempt themselves from the great commandment to care for God or neighbor today?*
- *When have you seen someone use religious rules or practices as a weapon with which to demean others?*
- *How can you develop and maintain a clear sense of relative priorities between divine doctrines and mere human precepts?*

In the third lesson Jesus teaches the true nature of purity. In the religious and cultural world of our Lord, people believed that impurity was based on external factors such as the food consumed, associations with other people, or the geographical area in which a person lived. Jesus redefines purity laws based on internal factors instead. Our Lord presents a list of twelve vices which cause impurity and are distinctive in that they affect our relationship with other people. In order to understand the meaning of this list, it is important to remember that "blasphemy" was primarily an action of slander or false accusation whereby the name of God was invoked in an attempt to falsely authenticate statements about another person. It is significant that Jesus identified sins that are interpersonal in nature rather than religious (against God). Our Lord is not denying the

significance of religious sins, but rather stressing the particularly damaging effect of interpersonal sins. It is these harmful actions towards other people that cause us to be impure in the eyes of God. This is an important lesson for disciples. We need to remember when we approach God in prayer that the Lord is aware of how we have approached others throughout our day.

The Letter of James from this Sunday's second reading makes explicit that authentic religion is expressed in our relationship with others (see Jas 1:27). James is not dismissing Christians in the first century of their religious obligation to God, but rather reminding them that their obligation to the Lord cannot be fulfilled when they disregard their duty to one another. Sometimes disciples can delude themselves into thinking that their spirituality or faith is distinct from their real-life interaction with others. This Gospel passage serves as a timeless reminder of the interconnectedness between love of God and love of neighbor and that impurity in one relationship inevitably brings impurity into the other. It is not our association with external factors that renders us impure in the eyes of God; it is our decisions of injustice, indifference, and selfishness that render us impure.

- *What happens when disciples disassociate their relationship with God from their relationship with neighbor?*
- *Why do you think Jesus didn't include any religious sins in the list of vices he presented?*
- *Which of those vices do you think is particularly damaging today for marriages, friendships, families, or professional interactions?*
- *If you were to compose a list of virtues that would promote purity in the eyes of God, what would those virtues be?*

Finally, this reading is an important opportunity for us to consider some additional ways in which this Gospel passage should challenge us. In order to understand the meaning Mark intended, we should be aware that the text of vs. 2 actually says that the Pharisees and Scribes, "...observed that some of his disciples ate their bread with unclean, that is, unwashed hands". Mark has mentioned bread several times in his Gospel so far (see 6, 36, 38, 41, 44, and 52) and it has often had a Eucharistic connection. This passage could be a continuation of that double meaning in Mark's use of the term. With this insight in mind, we can now pay attention to some other curious details. For example, Mark tells us that the Pharisees and Scribes noticed that "some" of the disciples acted in this way. The implication is that others did not act this way. Mark is pointing out the potential danger of diverse practices within the worshipping Christian community. It is important to recognize the value of practical unity in our religious celebrations lest division result because some do not act in the same way as others. Also, Mark gives specific examples of ritual washings that he then proceeds to explain.

The implication of the explanation is that Mark's audience would not have known the meaning behind these practices if they were not informed. This, too, is an important lesson for us as disciples. If we do not know the reasons behind our religious actions, we can hardly expect those actions to have much meaning for us or for God. These two examples indicate that Mark wanted the Christian community to be unified and conscientious of their worship experience. Mark wanted them to be sincere and authentic in their prayer and prioritized in their faith. He neither wanted the Church to preserve practices without reflecting on them nor to discard practices without understanding them.

Basically, Mark wants us as a Church to know what we do, why we do it, how to do it, and for whom we do it when it concerns our lives of faith. Most of all, Mark wants our celebration of the Eucharist to be our source of communion with God and neighbor and never the cause of our division. By reflecting on the lessons presented by our Lord in this passage, we can better experience the Eucharist in the way Mark wanted it and Jesus intended it.

- *What are prayer gestures that you make at every Mass but whose meaning and purpose you do not fully understand?*
- *How can you learn more about the various parts of the Mass and the significance and meaning being expressed in the liturgy?*
- *How can someone be distracted by others at Mass in such a way that the celebration ends up being a cause of division rather than a source of communion?*
- *What are examples of diverse practices within the worshipping community that can foster division or become distracting because some are acting differently from others?*
- *How do you know when diverse gestures are enriching and warranted?*