

Moral words, evil deeds (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

Mark's story is about the irony of keeping our hands ritually washed while being up to our elbows in evil.

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [August 25, 2009](#) issue

For some reason, Mark, who managed to produce only 16 short chapters to tell the whole story of Jesus, decided to devote more than half of one of those chapters to an account of a food fight.

It gets rolling when some scribes and Pharisees notice that Jesus' disciples eat without first washing their hands or their food, and they ask Jesus for an explanation. Admittedly, their choice of phrasing turns their question into something of a cocked revolver: "Why do your disciples eat with unwashed hands instead of following the ancient and holy traditions?" which is roughly equivalent to saying, "Why have you chosen to play golf today instead spending Sunday in church as almighty God has commanded?" This isn't a question; it's an accusation.

It clearly provokes Jesus' rage, setting him off on a long, passionate, sometimes sarcastic speech aimed mainly at his inquisitors. He begins nearly at full throttle, "Oh boy, did the prophet Isaiah ever have your number, you hypocrites," and accelerates from there, commenting along the way on a wide range of topics, such as purity laws, the commandments, responsibility to parents, the anatomy of digestion and the foibles of the human heart.

It is all quite fascinating, but it's difficult to fathom exactly what is at stake. As the vice principal of my high school would say when breaking up a rumble in the parking lot, "OK, boys, what's this fight all about?" Some commentators argue that the fight in the story mirrors a similar food conflict in Mark's community, and that's why he devotes so much ink to this little dustup. Mark, they explain, was a non-Palestinian gentile (notice his often fuzzy geography and his rather unsteady grip on Jewish practices), and he was writing to a mixed community of Jewish and gentile Christians

who were bickering over whether it was necessary to keep a kosher table at church gatherings. The point of the story is in 7:17-19, and to make sure we don't miss it, Mark himself suddenly rushes on stage waving his hands and declaring the breaking news: "Thus he declared all foods clean." Stop the squabbling, in other words, because what matters to Jesus is what's in your heart, not what's in the casserole at the potluck. But if this is the point, the lectionary editors have fumbled the ball, since they have cut these critical verses from the reading.

Other interpreters of this story have a very different take on what the fight is about. They say it's about humanly crafted religion versus the real thing. The key, then, is Jesus' charge, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition" (7:8). There is religion based on the divine commandments and there is religion based on a bunch of made-up traditions, and the scribes and Pharisees, with all of their rules about hand washing and purity, are clearly representatives of the latter. To make sure we get this, Mark, again speaking in his narrator's voice and with a "Can you believe this?" tone, tells us that "the Pharisees and all the Jews" wash everything before they eat—hands, food, pots, everything. Never mind that Mark, as an outsider to Jewish practice, doesn't quite get this right or that, in our germ-conscious age, washing before eating seems perfectly reasonable, even faithful. The main point remains: obedience to God's commandments trumps humanly made traditions and rules.

This is an attractive angle for some preachers since it allows them to zero in on their favorite pet peeve among "human traditions" (pick one—chancel-prancing liturgy, denominational headquarters, pipe organs, the pope, temperance, video screens in worship) and to issue an impassioned call to return to the divine commandments, to a spiritual religion of the heart. At my college some years ago, a Religious Emphasis Week speaker, apparently on the assumption that he was addressing a coven of southern fundamentalists with humanly contrived idolatries of scripture, astonished the students by reading the biblical text for the evening and then promptly tossing the Bible out an open window. "There goes your god!" he said to the flabbergasted crowd.

Very dramatic, but this pitting of human invention against divine command is a slippery slope, since it is hard to imagine any Christian practice, from the interpretation of scripture to the celebration of the Lord's Supper to working for justice, that doesn't involve some measure of "human tradition." Wielding a scalpel to neatly divide what God commands from the ways we humans form our religious

life is neither possible nor, in the final analysis, desirable.

Something far more serious stands at the core of Mark's story. It is not about sullyng God's commandments with human traditions, but about the irony of using moral posturing to sidestep the commandments altogether. It is about keeping our hands ritually washed while being up to our elbows in evil. It is about, to paraphrase Walker Percy, getting an A-plus in ethics and flunking life. In Jesus' day, this sometimes took the form of chirping about dedicating one's fortune to God as a clever ruse for getting around the commandment to honor and care for one's own aging parents. Moral words, evil deeds.

In our day? When an elected official portrays torture as moral, speaks of cruelty to human beings as "national security," calls tactics such as waterboarding "lawful, skillful and entirely honorable," and, like Jesus' opponents, charges critics with "recklessness cloaked in righteousness," we suddenly understand why Jesus flew into a rage. And we certainly know why he called on the words of the old prophet: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."