

EP THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. 29 MARK 7

In chapter seven the Pharisees reappear to attack Jesus, this time criticizing Him for allowing His disciples to eat without first ritually washing their hands and eating utensils. Jesus responds that, while the Pharisees faithfully adhered to their ritual obligations as devout Jews, they neglected the focus of the Law: loving God and others (Deuteronomy 6:4-6).

Many Christians believe that Jesus condemns all religious traditions in this chapter. Fr. Paul O'Callaghan explains that this is not true:

Jesus did not condemn the Pharisees merely for having traditions; he rejected the false traditions that the Pharisees practiced (cf. Mark 7:9-13) and condemned them for making the observance of certain legitimate traditions more important than following the teachings of God's Word... Jesus taught his disciples to keep the legitimate traditions, but to avoid being hypocritical as the Pharisees were (cf. Matthew 23:1-3). This is exactly the position of the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church rejects traditions that are at variance with the Scriptures, and practices only those which are proper expressions of the Christian faith.

Jesus concludes by explaining that we do not become unclean in God's sight because of accidental contact with bad things around us — we defile ourselves by giving in to the passions in our hearts (vv. 14-23). One focus of the spiritual disciplines of the Church is opening our lives to God by getting rid of our evil desires and behavior. St. Innocent of Alaska teaches:

The first duty of a Christian, of a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ,

is to deny oneself. To deny oneself means to give up one's bad habits, to root out of the heart all that ties us to the world; not to cherish bad desires and thoughts; to quench and suppress bad thoughts; to avoid occasions of sin; not to do or desire anything from self-love but to do everything out of love for God. To deny oneself means, according to the Apostle Paul, to be dead to sin and the world, but alive to God.

After being criticized for failing to adhere to ritual purity, Jesus went into a Gentile region which would have been viewed by the Jews as unclean. Furthermore, He encountered a woman whose daughter was possessed by an "unclean spirit" (vs. 25). Jesus did not originally go into Tyre and Sidon to minister: He wanted no one to know He was in the area (vs. 24) and, when asked by the woman to deliver her daughter from the demon, replied that His ministry was to the Jews (vs. 27).

The Church Fathers tell us to learn from the response of the woman to Jesus' initial refusal to help her. Even when Jesus refused her request to heal her daughter, the woman continued to humbly plead for His help. St. Ephrem the Syrian writes, "She did not give up. Though neglected, she did not hold back. Therefore [He said], 'Great is your faith, O woman.'"

Jesus compassionately healed a man who was deaf and suffered a speech impediment. Many people wonder why Jesus spat onto His fingers and then touched the man's tongue. Blessed Theophylact explains that this action shows that every part of Jesus's body, even His saliva, was "marvelous and divine."

A QUICK TIP FOR YOUR LIFE

TRADITION

It is easy for us to look at the traditions mentioned in Mark 7, such as the ritual washing of kitchen utensils, and believe that we are free from the "tradition of men" because we do not allow such things to distract us from God. At the same time, however, there are other ways in which we can become misguided by creating our own traditions that interfere with our relationship with God.

If, for example, we advocate opening Holy Communion to anyone who wants it to avoid appearing intolerant, or claim that we should play rock music during the Liturgy because it would be more popular, we are creating a new tradition based upon modern biases.

Are you living our Holy Tradition, or are you following distracting "traditions?"

