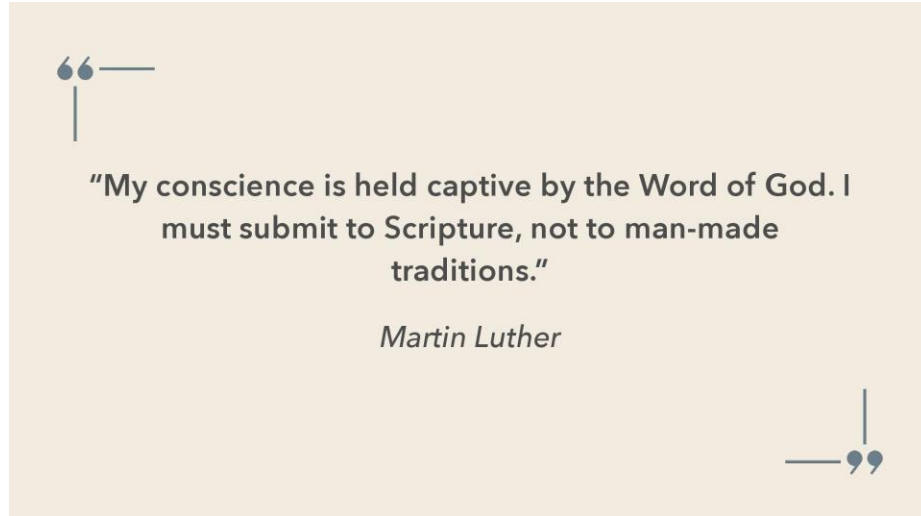


Title: The Book of Mark: Part 19, How Man “improves” God’s Law  
Speaker: Corey Brown  
Passage: Mark 7:1-23  
Big idea: Jesus shows us the true condition of our human hearts.



We are continuing on in our series of Mark, looking at what it actually looks like to live free in the gospel. As opposed to the legalism of religion.



As we reflect on this quote, let’s dive into this passage in Mark 7.

<sup>1</sup>The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup> (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup> When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

<sup>5</sup>So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

<sup>6</sup>He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. <sup>7</sup> They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”

<sup>8</sup>You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

<sup>9</sup>And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! <sup>10</sup> For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ <sup>11</sup> But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), <sup>12</sup> then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. <sup>13</sup> Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

<sup>14</sup> Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. <sup>15</sup> Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’”

<sup>17</sup> After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. <sup>18</sup> “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? <sup>19</sup> For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”)

<sup>20</sup> He went on: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ <sup>21</sup> For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”

Mark 7:1-23

# BIG IDEA

Jesus shows us the **true condition**  
of our **human hearts**.



Mark 7:1-2, “The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed.”

The Pharisees are starting to hear some of the recent things that Jesus has been doing, and they make the long journey from Jerusalem to the Capernaum Galilee Region. This is approximately 90 Miles, on foot, or by cart and donkey.

Obviously, Jesus has now garnered the attention of not only local Rabbi’s and the local religious leaders in Capernaum, but also south to the heart of Jewish life. The Pharisees also bring the scribes, the people who are learning under the authority of the Pharisees, so that they can keep record of all the findings of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees point out that the disciples were not ceremonially “clean” according to how they upheld the Jewish “oral traditions” of the elders.

This is how it worked:

Because the Jews were so tied to the land, and so much of their history was about God removing them from the land due to their sin (through exiles and oppression), we get a sense that they were not only trying to uphold God’s law but were taking it further to ensure that they would not come to the line of the law.

The problem is that this practice and way of thinking created legalism. Legalism happens when commands are given that put a greater burden on people than what God has commanded for their good. For example:

- The Law says that you cannot harvest on Sabbath, but that doesn’t mean you cannot pick fruit to eat.
- The Law says that you must keep ceremonially clean from blood, dead bodies, and those who are unclean from disease, but these extras were to ensure that people did not do anything that resembled an unclean possibility.

This command about clean hands is not so much the issue that they did not wash their dirty hands before they ate, but the way in which they did it was not in the tradition set up by the elders and pharisees.

The distinction between the words *unclean* and *unwashed* are specific. Unclean means common hands or worked hands. Mark continues and gives an understanding saying that their hands were “ritually unwashed” meaning that they did not do what the tradition for religious washings demanded from the oral tradition.

What is their reasoning for this? One commentator poses this:

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| **This ritual had nothing to do with hygiene; it was purely ceremonial to get rid of whatever defilement the Jews accidentally picked up from the Gentiles or Samaritans. Tradition is not necessarily a bad thing, but when it has more authority than the Word of God, then it is wrong.**

*Warren Wiersbe*

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The issue was about blame and keeping themselves Jewish, as opposed to keeping themselves faithful to God.

Mark 7:3-4, “(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

So, in verses 3 and 4 we get an explanation of what the context is for this conflict. A context that would have been put there for Gentile readers by Mark, this is the reason for the parentheses.

Jesus ensured that his disciples did not hold in high regard the religious authorities’ traditions as if it was Law, because it wasn’t Law. It was simply a tradition; it was a second command placed on the people that took the command of God to higher restraints.

Mark 7:5, “So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, ‘Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?’”

This is called the Halakhah, or the tradition of the Elders, or the Oral Tradition.

Here we see the question from the Pharisees and Scribes about why Jesus’ disciples do not hold to their oral traditions. Their questioning of the disciple’s behaviour is not directed to the disciples, rather at Jesus. In this culture, the master is responsible for the actions of the students. This of course makes sense, but in this culture, you must demand your traditions so as not to allow for such insensitive behaviour.

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| **There are principles of ritual cleanliness set forth by God in the OT, but they are few and are easy to follow. For instance, the OT law required the priests of Israel to wash their hands before they entered the Holy Place, and offered Sacrifices. However, there was no law that required ordinary people to go through ritual cleansing before they ate bread**

*RC Sproul: Mark (pg 155)*

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Mark 7:6-7, “He replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.””

Jesus answers them with the real law, the prophet Isaiah’s response to the children of Israel from God himself. Isaiah writes because the people had forgone their relationship with Yahweh as his people and had turned to themselves to govern their own law.

In this response, Jesus does not answer their question, but raises a greater one. Jesus is suggesting that they are so far from God for thinking up man made laws to subvert God’s law. Or EVEN WORSE, they assume so great an authority, that they can actually reinterpret, or *add* to God’s perfect Law.

Here is what Isaiah said:

Isaiah 29:13, “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.””

In these next verses, Jesus explains what he means to the religious leaders in a very direct way. This is his response to the Pharisees and Scribes who he knew were there to build a case against him.

Mark 7:8-9, “‘You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.’ And he said to them: ‘You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!’”

There is so much to unpack here. Jesus seems to be getting at the heart of the matter quickly, but if we do not understand that this Halakhah was passed down and added to the Law of Moses, then we can end up thinking that Jesus is reordering the Law or changing God’s Laws.

This is not the case. Jesus reorients the Real Law of God around himself. We see this primarily inside of the Sermon on the Mount.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus regularly uses this phrase, “you have heard it said, but I say to you”.

What Jesus is doing is not reinterpreting the Law of Moses, but rather re-establishing it as God’s law. He is attacking the Halakhah. Working to remove it and saying that the additional laws are not only unnecessary, but they can be and are harmful.

Mark 7:10-12, “‘For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.””

Jesus makes a contrast between the Real Law and the Halakhah when he says, “Moses Says...but you say”.

What is Jesus getting at?

Jesus has just told them, they have trampled on the law of Moses, which was given directly from God, and replaced it with their own legalism that was man made.

Jesus has just said you think you are following God, but you have abandoned His Law.

In verse 11 we see this word, Corban. What is a Corban?

A corban was a modified law that the Jews executed in order to forego their responsibility to their aging parents.

The Pharisees created a theological loophole. They simply declared what they would have given to their parents “Corban,” a Hebrew term referring to “a gift dedicated to God.”

They would take their material goods and then “devote them to the Lord” but would do this as an excuse to not care materially for the aging parents.

Jesus uses “you say” to pit the traditions against the Law of God. And then in this Jesus uses something that they have distinctly changed from God’s Law to their own advantage which disgraces the actual command and spirit of the Law.

Here are the “corban” laws:

Leviticus 27:28, “But nothing that a man owns and devotes to the Lord—whether man or animal or family land—may be sold or redeemed; everything so devoted is most holy to the Lord.”

So, do you see how this is playing out?

The Law is what the elders are making it - not what God has commanded.

Mark 7:13, “Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

\*\*\*This is the key phrase of the whole passage\*\*\*

It is this statement that gets to the heart of the matter with the Pharisees. Jesus just told them that their devotion to the “law” is actually abandonment of the Law.

The word *nullify* is the word “invalidate”. Meaning to remove of its power, take away from its purpose, or make unnecessary.

The Oral traditions, and the traditions of the elders became more prominent than the spirit of the Law, the reason for the Law, and the purpose of God’s relationship with Israel.

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**Never in the NT do we find the Lord Jesus criticizing or disobeying the written law of God. But i seems as if every day, everywhere Jesus went, He violated the oral tradition.**  
RC Sproul: Mark (pg 156)  
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Then Jesus clarifies that this was not the only thing they had abused. If the Pharisees who were the keepers of the law could abuse their gifts of the Lord towards their families, how much more towards those who were not family.

Mark 7:14-15, “Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’”

Jesus now directs his attention away from the Pharisees to whom he was making this direct point and turns to the crowd to make a public teaching, in the faces of the Pharisees.

The Jews had held under the teachings of their rulers and elders that a Jew can only become defiled by things that they come in contact with that are defiled. Not from what is in them.

This is a condition statement. Jesus is reorienting the implications of the law around sin not only as behaviour, but sin as the condition of the human heart. The issue of the heart is what Jesus is getting at. What is your motivation? Are you being driven by trying to keep yourself clean, or are you trying to be purified?

Jesus reorients their attention around what the Law was supposed to do, to point them to God.

Okay the next verse, verse 16. Uh oh ... we don't have a verse here.

Mark's gospel, in the English translations NIV, CSB, ESV, and NASB do not include the statement of Jesus in verse 16 claiming; "If anyone has ears, let them hear". Jesus uses this statement often with his teachings, with the idea that some will hear and understand, and other will not understand.

Some manuscripts and translations include this, but not all.

Here are possibilities as to why this is the case:

1. It could be that Jesus didn't say this at this time, and that it was added in later because it is something like what Jesus would say to close off teachings.
2. It could be that it was original to the audience but unnecessary for the text to hold it.

Mark 7:17, "After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable."

The disciples and Jesus go away to whatever house they were staying in. Here his disciples asked him about the parable. What parable were they talking about here? The teaching he included was not a parable, but was directly against both the Pharisees' legalism, and freedom for the common people not to have to follow the traditions of the elders. It could be due to the nature of vs 16, as a response to many of Jesus' parables and teachings he expressed that not everything would be understood by all.

Mark 7:18-19, "'Are you so dull?' he asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.' (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")"

Jesus is saying, "does it not make sense to your mind?" but he then graciously re-explains this idea for them.

Nothing that God has created for food can defile you for righteousness's sake. Food cannot make you holy or unholy. Only what comes out of your heart.

What goes into your stomach ultimately is without consequence, but what flows from your heart is what defiles us.

This is an issue of condition, not only behaviour. Sin is not just an act that we do, before we are redeemed by Christ, it is the condition of who we are.

When people say things like, "well nobody's perfect, but I'm a good person" they are thinking purely of behaviour, not condition.

Defilement of ourselves is not only what we produce, it is, by our very nature (apart from Christ), who we are.

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**we blithely say, “to Err is human, to forgive is divine” and “nobody’s perfect. When we say such things, we demonstrate that we see sin as something on the edge, something tangential, something peripheral to our existence. Jesus said: ‘No, defilement comes from the very core of your being’**

*RC Sproul: Mark (pg 167)*

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Mark 7:20, “He went on: ‘What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’”

This is the core of this text. Jesus has said this phrase many times now.

Jesus wanted his disciples to learn this, and for us to learn this too.

The root of the heart will be seen in the fruit of our lives.

Inside matters. What comes from our heart is what matters, a heart that is full of sin, self indulgence and self justification needs to be reset, reborn, regenerated to be a heart that is full of Christ.

Mark 7:21-23, “For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”

Look at what Jesus says the problem is here. The thing that creates all these issues is the heart and what comes out of us.

There is something very significant about the traditions of the elders. Remember I mentioned that these things are not Law, but they are there in order to set up additional protection from abusing the law.

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**these leaders resented it when our Lord openly flaunted their authority. After all, these practices had been handed down from the fathers and carried with them the authority of the ages! The Jews called tradition “the fence of the Law.” It was not the Law that protected the tradition, but the tradition that protected the Law!**

*The Bible Exposition Commentary*

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See the problem? It should be the other way around. Rather than setting up laws to hold God's Law in check, we need to simply hold to God's Law.

So how do we live holding to God's Law?

I have this great image of a house with a fence. The house is your life, and the fence is what God has designed for human good and flourishing. You have the freedom to move about and in and out of the house, but there are consequences when you move outside the fence. God has placed the fence there for protection, to keep out the bad or dangerous things.

What the Pharisees were doing was creating additional fences within the fence that God already set up.

We do this too. We set up fences around preferences we have that God is not specifically clear about. Requiring all Christians to live within our fence. Personal preferences or conviction about a topic is fine. You can limit your freedom, but you shouldn't limit everyone else.

We also set up fences outside of God's fence and try to manipulate God's Law to approve our sin. We make statements like, "God's Law is outdated", "we've evolved and are smarter", "that can't possibly be what He meant", "this does not fit our culture", etc. We buy the lie that God's Law is not timeless. We assume that God was either incorrect or did not give us all the information, because we have decided that the boundary He placed is too restricting.

Jesus continually points the Pharisees back to God's boundary. He never expanded or stretched the boundary, Jesus perpetually pointed back to what God designed.

So, here is what we should Do and what we should Not Do (Don't) when it comes to living in freedom.

### **Do: A Regular Heart Check**

Jesus tells us in verses 21-23 that out of our heart comes these evil things. So, taking time to check and see if what is coming out of our heart is good and what God says is for our flourishing is a good practice.

Now, while we do this, we avoid the lies of religious performance.

### **Don't: Buy into Religious Performance**

This is what I mean, when we are living for God, when the things coming out of us are good, don't buy the lie that this is what saves us. This is the sin of pride that can come out of our heart.

### **Do: Battle Legalism with Grace and Truth**

This is always Jesus' response. He never shrinks from the truth but is always gracious towards us.

### **Don't: Apologize for God's Commands**

It would be so much easier if we could leave out bits and pieces of what God has commanded, but it would not be for our good. Hold strongly to the knowledge that what God has said, He has said for our good and flourishing. Trust the heart of God.

This is my prayer for us. That we would be so connected to Jesus and his heart for us, that we would live in the joy of what he has given and not think that he is holding out on us.

What he has designed is good enough, and it leads to our good and flourishing.

