

MARK: Glimpses of the Kingdom

Majoring on Minors

Mark 7:1-23

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One of the realities of walking through Mark's Gospel and its 16 chapters in 13 weeks is that we have to skip over a lot of really great stuff. Mark's Gospel is filled with so many important events that exploring all of them would probably take at least a year of sermons. Last week, I preached on chapters 4 and 5 of Mark, and this week I'll be focusing on chapter 7. That means we'll miss chapter 6, where Jesus sent out his 12 disciples to minister on their own for the first time, where John the Baptist was executed, where Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish, and where we read the account of Jesus walking on the water.

There is much in Mark we won't get to, but we are zooming in on events that give us snapshots of who Jesus is and what his kingdom is about. I've titled this sermon series "Glimpses of the Kingdom" because throughout his gospel, Mark makes the case that Jesus is God's Son, the promised Messiah, and that his coming means God's kingdom has arrived.

As I've been thinking about Jesus' preaching and ministry, it occurred to me that Jesus' announcement that He was the Messiah and that God's kingdom had arrived involved communicating to two groups of people: Jews who were followers of God and who had been awaiting the Messiah's coming, and the general population that included Gentiles (non-Jews) and people who were Jews by birth but weren't devout followers of God and who weren't focused on the Messiah's coming. To the Gentiles and the Jews who weren't awaiting the Messiah's coming, Jesus communicated God's love and power in a variety of ways. To the devout followers of God, while he demonstrated God's love and power, He invested much time trying to revise their understanding of who God was and what it looked like to follow Him. Jesus repeatedly confronted misunderstandings religious people had about God and demonstrated who God was and what was most important to Him.

In chapter 7, the passage we'll be exploring today, Jesus once again confronts the Jewish religious leaders about who God is and what's most important to Him. I've titled today's sermon "Majoring on Minors" because in this chapter, Jesus attempts to shift the focus of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law from legalistically performing religious rituals and following rules to living their lives based on what is on God's heart. I encourage you to follow along as I read verses 1–23 of Mark chapter 7.

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus ² and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴ 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.)

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 defiled hands?"

⁶ 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. ⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' ⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."

⁹ And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! ¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' ¹¹ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— ¹² then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. ¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” ¹

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

²⁰ He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” – Mark 7:1-23

There’s no denying Jesus was hard on the religious leaders. He openly confronted them and passionately expressed his disagreement with much of what they said and did. Jesus’ harsh approach to the religious leaders doesn’t fit our image of Him as meek, mild, loving and kind. So why was Jesus so hard on these guys? We find Jesus’ most biting critique in Matthew 23, where the entire chapter is devoted to Jesus’ denunciation of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Listen to some of the judgments Jesus made:

- You tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but you yourselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. – Matthew 23:4
- Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. – Matthew 23:13
- Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. Woe to you, blind guides! – Matthew 23:15– 16

Jesus was hard on the Jewish religious leaders, because while it was their job was to help people grow in their relationship with God, they put barriers in front of people that created distance between them and God and made it difficult, if not impossible, for people to truly know their Heavenly Father.

Let's go back and look a bit more closely at the verses I read from Mark chapter 7. The Pharisees and teachers of the law, as was often the case, initiated this conflict with Jesus by pointing out something they thought He or his disciples were doing that violated the Jewish Law. In this case, their complaint was that the disciples hadn't washed their hands before they ate. A concern for hygiene was probably how this tradition originated—just like it's common practice for us to wash our hands before we eat—but the tradition had evolved into “ceremonial washing” that had more to do with religious ritual and tradition than it did with cleanliness. Two weeks ago, when we focused on Jesus confronting the religious leaders about their understanding of Sabbath, I pointed out that since the time Moses had given God's Law to his people, the Jewish laws surrounding Sabbath and their view of holiness had morphed into absurdity. Jesus' overarching critique of the Pharisees and teachers of the law was that while they were supposed to be teachers of God's Law, they in fact had become teachers and upholders of rituals and traditions. Jewish rituals and traditions had replaced the Scriptures, God's Word, as the guide for how people were to love God and live their lives.

As an example of how the religious leaders had replaced the truth of God's Word with human traditions Jesus says this in verses 14 and 15: “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them”(Mark 7:14–15). After Jesus said this, his disciples were confused and asked Him to clarify what He meant. So, Jesus continued:

Are you so dull? Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body. What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” – Mark 7:18-23

The religious leaders and the Jewish people had become so obsessed with holiness—not allowing anything outside of them to defile them so they wouldn’t be acceptable to God—that they had forgotten that what God is most concerned about is what’s in our hearts. Holiness, being set apart for God, ultimately isn’t about legalism—the rules we keep and the bad things we avoid. Holiness is determined by what’s in our hearts—our love, affection, desires and attitude. Many of us grew up in religious traditions where externals were so emphasized that we lost sight or were never really taught that our relationship with God is ultimately about what’s in our hearts. It’s true that what is in our hearts will be made obvious by how we live our lives, but focusing on the externals can lead us to forget that what we do and how we live flows from what is in our hearts. The Pharisees and other religious leaders had forgotten this truth, and the result was that religious rules and rituals had been substituted for relationship with God.

Majoring on minors led people to focus on following external rules rather than allowing God to transform their hearts, and it also resulted in them giving lip service to loving God and loving others rather than actually worshiping God and demonstrating their love for others by caring for the needs of those around them. Listen again to Jesus’ words in Mark 7:6–13:

⁶ 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.

⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’

⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

⁹ And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ ¹¹ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— ¹² then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. ¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

The Gospel writers quoted the prophet Isaiah more than any other Old Testament prophet, and much like Jesus, Isaiah frequently critiqued the Jewish religious leaders and the people of Israel for focusing so much energy on religious rituals and claiming to worship God while ignoring God's heart for the people around them. One of the best-known examples of Isaiah judgment of God's people's propensity for fixating on religious rituals while ignoring those in need is found in Isaiah chapter 58. Listen as I read verses 2–12 from this chapter.

For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.

'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring

whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings. – Isaiah 58:2-12

As easy as it is to criticize the Pharisees and other religious leaders in Jesus' day, majoring on minors isn't a problem that was unique to 1st Century Jewish religion; it's a human tendency that has plagued Jesus' Church in every generation, including our own. I'd like us to seek to apply Jesus' words in Mark 7 to our lives by focusing on two tendencies I think we all can recognize in ourselves.

Our first tendency is one I emphasized two weeks ago when we explored Jesus' teaching on Sabbath. We tend to prioritize legalistic religion over relationship with Jesus and heartfelt lifestyle worship of God. Faith, sincerity and worship of God are nearly impossible to evaluate and quantify, and so we often try to measure faithfulness by focusing on externals—using a mental checklist. Taken to an extreme, we end up evaluating faithfulness based on how well people keep rules and avoid outward sins rather than focusing on the heart. There's a huge difference between seeking to earn God's approval and the applause of people by focusing on doing the right things and avoiding wrong, and heartfelt love for God that demonstrates itself in how we live our lives by loving God and loving others. At first glance, the two approaches may look the same, but their motivations are entirely different.

Our second tendency, which Mark 7 addresses, is to prioritize our comfort and our community life inside God's house, over loving our neighbors by caring for them and meeting their needs. Christian community is vital for followers of Jesus as we seek to remain strong and grow in our relationship with our Lord. Christian community plays an important role in encouraging and strengthening us in our faith and in equipping the Body of Christ to fulfill Jesus' mission. Vibrant relationships with brothers and sisters are essential, but Christian community was never intended to be an end unto itself. This one is especially near and dear to my heart. After growing up in a church environment that was extremely inward focused, God began to burden my heart as a youth pastor with the pain and brokenness of people all around me. As I moved into the role of McBIC's Lead Pastor, God impressed on me a hunger to invest

time and energy in shining his light and sharing his love with people outside of the church community, and a burden to inspire and equip and send out followers of Jesus to do the same.

My challenge for us as God's people this morning is two-fold. First, to resist the temptation to major on minors and to instead embrace our Heavenly Father's heart of prioritizing relationship with Jesus over religion. Secondly, I challenge us to prioritize loving our neighbors by caring for them and meeting their needs over focusing on our own comfort and our community life inside our church. As I make that last point, I want to make sure I'm not misinterpreted. Community with our brothers and sisters inside the church is essential, and meeting and caring for one another's needs is given great emphasis throughout the New Testament, but that can never overshadow God's call in the Old and New Testaments to love and point people to God's love for them outside of the church.

Think of it like two bodies of water: One is a self-contained, isolated pond; the other, a pond connected to a gurgling, swift moving stream. The self-contained, isolated pond is stagnant and will quickly turn ugly shades of green and brown as moss and algae accumulate in a layer of scum on the surface. Eventually the pond won't be able to sustain life unless it has an outlet. By contrast, the pond connected to the stream is fresh, alive and healthy, and it's sustainable.

God's call for his church isn't for us to be self-contained, isolated, and stagnant. His desire is for us be fresh, alive and vibrant, sustaining life within our community and bringing Jesus' life and energy to those outside of our community.

May the Holy Spirit continue to empower us to be people who resist the temptation to major on minors, and instead to prioritize what is near and dear to our Heavenly Father's heart. Jesus, let your kingdom come!