

“When Religion Becomes a Curse”

Steve Ramer
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Scriptures

Mark 7:1-15

7:1 The Pharisees gather around him, along with some of the scholars, who had come from Jerusalem. When they noticed some of his disciples eating their meal with defiled hands, that is to say, without washing them. 3 (you see, the Pharisees, and the Judeans generally wouldn't think of eating without first washing their hands in a particular way, always observing the tradition of the elders, 4 and they won't eat when they get back from the marketplace without washing again and there are many other traditions they cherish, such as the washing of cups and jugs and kettles), 5 the Pharisees and the scholars start questioning him: "Why don't your disciples live up to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating bread with defiled hands?" 6 And he answered them, "How accurately Isaiah depicted you phonies when he wrote, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart stays far away from me. 7 Their worship of me is empty, because they insist on teachings that are human doctrines.' 8 You have set aside God's commandment and hold fast to human tradition." 9 Or he would say to them, "How expert you've become at putting aside God's commandment in order to keep your tradition! 10 For instance, Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother' and 'Those who curse their father or mother will surely die.' 11 But you say, 'If people say to their father or mother, "Whatever I might have spent to support you is korban"' (which means "consecrated to God"), you no longer let those persons do anything for their father or mother. 13 So you end up invalidating God's word with your own tradition, which you then perpetuate. And you do all kinds of other things like that!" 14 Once again he summoned the crowd and would say to them: "Listen to me, all of you, and try to understand! 15 there is nothing outside a person that can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

Sermon

If this morning's scripture sounds familiar, well it should. Two Sunday's ago I preached on Matthew's version of the same story. Both are virtually the same and drive home the same point!

In both passages a dramatic conflict was started when the religious leaders, aka, the scholars/scribes and the Pharisees, attacked Jesus' followers for their failure to observe certain purity rituals.

They were complaining to Jesus since their primary job was to codify and enforce religious ordinances.

But as I pointed out two weeks ago those time honored "purity" codes

were critically important in maintaining not only the boundaries of their religion (defining who was in and who was outside), but one's status in society as a sufficiently pious individual.

Without mincing any words, Jesus responded with a harsh counter attack.

"And you, you're all just a bunch of phonies!"

"Hypocrites who say one thing and do another."

He even got all scriptural on 'em! By quoting Isaiah,

"they profess with their lips but not with their hearts."

Mark also gives us a bit more detail than Matthew on the specific ways those religious leaders were "setting aside God's commandments" in order to honor their own traditions instead.

Where Matthew has the Pharisees complaining only about hand washing before meals,

Mark goes into great detail by indicating the nearly exhausting amount of ritual washing that was expected by the most pious.

For those folk, nearly every journey outside their homes required some form of ritual purification once they returned.

Daily life was filled with potential for religious pollution.

And it wasn't just foreigners who you needed to look out for, but even those Jews who failed to be as fastidious as they were. Of course washing food and kitchen utensils is always a good idea.

But as I said two weeks ago none of this washing had anything to do with good sanitation practices.

It did, however, have everything to do with keeping the piously pure and separated from those in society that were "unclean."

Now many scholars believe that only a relatively small number of folks actually managed to follow all those proscribed rituals, but those few still managed to maintain the oppressive status quo.

The fact that Jesus did not deny their accusations, but responded by accusing them of even worse, indicated that most likely Jesus and his followers were in fact guilty of what they were being accused.

Yep, most likely they were getting their hands dirty doing the work of God and especially that most offensive of all acts of impurity - eating with foreigners and sinners.

Eating together can be one of the most unifying of human interactions. When we literally break bread with those whom we do not know, or with those whom we do not trust, or even fear, it can break down barriers.

And sharing food and eating together was a key part of both Jesus' message and his everyday behavior. And as we actual begin eating together with the outcast, or the sinner, the foreigner, or the poor we are also more likely to begin to hunger for something more important - justice.

Mark, curiously also has Jesus address a very specific, yet archaic ancient Jewish practice called *korban*. Mark fortunately defines it for his readers as "consecration to God!" Which, of course, sounds like a good thing, right?

Well, maybe, like a lot of things, perhaps it had started out that way? But by Jesus' time the blessings that might have been gained from all those gifts that were "consecrated to God" by donating them to the Temple, had actually become a curse.

According to Ched Myers, "The Korban vow concerned a practice of consecrating or "willing" one's property and resource to the temple. Once this vow was made, personal assets belonged to the temple treasury and though still in the hands of the owner, could not be used. But Jesus describes a situation in which the "vow" becomes a "curse" the traditional exercise of economic responsibility for one's parents according to the Torah.

The human tradition had superseded and thus nullified God's law. Rather than using those gifts consecrated to the Temple to actually take care of the poor, which time and time again defined "true religion" throughout Jewish scriptures, the practice of *korban* was actually impoverishing and thus dishonoring some of the most vulnerable in society, the elderly!

And by this time, the Temple treasury had increasingly become dependent upon such wills and vows for its revenue. And its balances was now being depleted in order to support the ecclesial hierarchy of, you guessed it, the same folks who made and enforced the rules they were attacking Jesus for breaking.

It is also important to "out" Jesus' opponents. The first group mentioned were the scholars or as some translations call them, "the scribes."

They were part of that vast array of Temple bureaucrats needed to keep that whole institution going.

And on most issues the scholars/scribes would have been at odds with the other group mentioned, the Pharisees.

But when it came to preserving the largest source of revenue for the Temple's continued operation, those two adversaries managed somehow to find some common ground.

Who says Jesus wasn't able to unite folks?

But Jewish scripture had always been clear that the wealth of the nation, and the glory of the Temple, had one source, Yahweh, and the primary reason for this blessing was to share it so that there would be no poor in the land (even among foreigners!).

The "tradition of the elders" however, were of human origin and perhaps even well intentioned?

But they had become the province of a corrupt religious establishment who now manipulated these rules to preserve the wealth of the few.

Not only has good religion become bad but it has become a curse clearly dishonoring those elders who were to be given respect.

But of course, blatant dishonoring victimization of the elderly is nothing new or something merely confined to ancient and corrupted Pharisaical practices.

According to a recent article in Kaiser Health News (September, 2), the elderly in the US are increasingly suffering from malnutrition!

On a cold December day in 2016, widower Robert Mukes, 71, starved to death, alone in his Cincinnati apartment.

Listed as the primary cause of death was

"starvation of unknown etiology" and "possible hypothermia," since his apartment had no electricity or running water.

Death records also showed that the 5-foot-7-inch man weighed only a smidge over a 100 pounds.

Indeed, millions of seniors across the country quietly go hungry as the safety net designed to catch them frays.

Nearly 8% of Americans 60 and older were "food insecure" in 2016 which means that's 5.5 million seniors don't have consistent access to enough food for a healthy life.

And that number has more than doubled since 2001.

The problem is most acute in parts of the South in the states of, Mississippi, Louisiana and the Carolinas. A region with likely the highest number of “Bible believers”?

Memphis fares worst among major metropolitan areas, with 17% of its seniors unsure of their next meal. And unfortunately, the government ain’t givin’ them no relief.

The Older Americans Act — passed more than half a century ago as part of President Johnson’s Great Society reforms and then amended by President Nixon in 1972 - provided for home-delivered and group meals, along with other services, for anyone 60 and older.

But its funding has lagged far behind the population growth among seniors as well as economic inflation. The biggest chunk of the act’s budget, nutrition services, dropped by 8% over the past 18 years when adjusted for inflation. Home-delivered and group meals have also decreased by nearly 21 million since 2005.

Add to this that only a fraction of those facing food insecurity actually get any meal services under the act; in 2013 83% got none. With the act set to expire at the end of this month, Congress is now considering it’s reauthorization and how much to spend going forward.

Meanwhile only 45% of eligible adults have signed up for SNAP, the food stamp program for America’s poorest. And even fewer seniors may have SNAP in the future. More than 13% of SNAP households with elderly members would lose benefits under a recent Trump administration proposal.

For now, millions of seniors, especially low-income ones, go without. Across the nation, long waits are common for home-delivered meals.

In Memphis, for example, the wait to get on the Meals on Wheels schedule is more than a year long. And as seniors ration food, programs ration services. Funds are so limited that some programs have no choice but to triage people based on who needs food the most.

Nationally, “there are tens of thousands of seniors who are waiting,” said Erika Kelly, of Meals on Wheels America. “While they’re waiting, their health deteriorates and,

in some cases, we know that seniors have died.”

While older adults of all income levels can face difficulties,
rates are of course highest among seniors in poverty.
They are also higher than average among minorities.
And, even if it rarely kills directly,
hunger can complicate illness and kill slowly.
Malnutrition blunts immunity,
which already tends to weaken as people age.
And since malnutrition exacerbates diseases and prevents healing,
seniors without steady, nutritious food can wind up in hospitals
and often relapse quickly or even die after discharge.

This, my sisters and brothers, is an evil of our own
human tradition of ignoring the poorest of the poor.

What we call a sin according to the commandments of God!
It is also legal according to the ordinances passed by our elected officials.

The wealth with which our nation has been blessed with
is now a curse to those who are the most vulnerable.
Is this how we are to “honor” our mothers and our fathers?!
Instead of honoring our elders we curse them with poverty,
leaving them to literally starve to death alone!

Leaving us to proclaim, “God have mercy on our nation!”
“Christ have mercy on us for our complicity!”
And help deliver us from our sin!

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