

## **Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: December 2<sup>nd</sup>: Mark 7:1-23: Some Notes**

Jesus is criticised for not living up to Jewish standards, or rather for not making his followers live up to Jewish standards. He responds by a very radical attack on the religion of rules getting in the way of the faith which promotes right living. It is interesting that Mark, or Mark's editor, has to explain to the first recipients of this Gospel what the argument is all about. It is, as always, a bit disconcerting that the disciples don't immediately get the point. The commentaries explain about hand-washing and dietary rules – mainly in terms of being different from and separate from those around. It is worth dwelling on the point that, while it probably all seems very trivial to us, strict Jews were willing to be tortured to death rather than eat pork. That is impressive, and challenges us, even if we personally couldn't care less about pig versus cow versus cabbage. I want to share some thoughts on the basics.

Thought one is that we can't actually duck the detail of what discipleship involves. Most Christians would probably say that going to church is important. But that could mean going once a year if I feel like it, and if the weather is nice, and if nothing more important crops up. In other words, we probably have to convert the general principle into something more specific and disciplined, which might mean determining to go every Sunday unless..... [and the unless had better be more convincing than "not feeling like it"]. Similarly with e.g. private prayer. If we don't have some sort of "rules", we might find that we have forgotten how to pray. Probably, not a good parallel; but we wouldn't put personal hygiene or cleaning our teeth in the category of "Fine in principle, but I don't want to tie myself down to specifics"?

Much more challenging is what Jesus says about the things that matter more than hand-washing and diet. He says "Don't even think about it!" He says in effect that letting your imagination dwell on doing the wrong thing is as bad as doing the wrong thing. There is a well-known cartoon of two monks watching a rather nice-looking young lady walk by, and one saying to the other "If thinking about it is as bad as doing it, we're wasting our time in here!" I don't think Jesus is saying we should never let pride, lust, violence, jealousy, etc, etc, enter our heads. I'm pretty sure he is saying DON'T DWELL ON IT!!! That discipline is also very demanding, but it is, with a considerable effort, do-able.

As so often with Bible messages, it doesn't do to stop happily with the comforting feeling that I've never been addicted to excessive hand-washing, or to dietary fads, or to trying to do the kids out of their inheritance by promising to leave everything to the church or to spending my pension lump sum on a holiday in the Bahamas so that I can't be expected to adapt the spare room for an elderly parent. We need to read on, and recognise that we have given room to some very nasty thoughts that never quite got onto Facebook but are festering away inside.

I was taken by the Blessing I heard yesterday: "God bless you, and those you love, and those you ought to love." (Maybe that's one way of moving firmly away from "I could kill X".... even though I haven't bought the gun yet.)