

# Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

## Session Twelve – Mark 7

*Mark 7:1-4 - 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.)*

In order for his Roman readers to understand what this next section is about, Mark gives a brief explanation of Jewish ritual law – in this case, the ritual washing of hands and utensils. This is not to be confused with washing for the purposes of cleanliness, but instead achieving a ritual state of religious purity. The laws are together known as “kosher.”

From Chabad.org: The Hebrew word “kosher” literally means “fit.” The laws of kosher define the foods that are fit for consumption for a Jew. This includes which animals are consumed, how food is prepared, and even how and when it is served. (Note: The Moslem system of dietary rules, known as “halal,” is similar)

The kosher laws were commanded by God to the children of Israel in the Sinai Desert. Moses taught them to the people and wrote the basics of these laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. The details were handed down through the generations and eventually written down by the rabbinical authorities as safeguards for these biblical laws (“Tradition of the Elders”)

The kosher laws emphasize that Judaism is much more than a religion in the conventional sense of the word. For observant Jews, holiness is not confined to holy places and times outside the everyday; rather, life in its totality is a sacred endeavor. Even the seemingly mundane activity of eating is a Godly act and a uniquely Jewish experience.

### **Some Basic Kosher Rules** (Chabad.org)

- Certain species of animals (and their eggs and milk) are permitted for consumption, while others are forbidden—notably pork and shellfish.
- Meat and milk are never combined. Separate utensils are used for each, and a waiting period is observed between eating them.
- Meat must come from animals that are slaughtered in a specific (and painless) manner known as shechitah, and certain parts of the animal (including the blood) must be removed.

- Fruits, vegetables and grains are basically always kosher, but must be insect free. Wine or grape juice, however, must be certified kosher.
- Since even a small trace of a non-kosher substance can render a food not kosher, all processed foods and eating establishments require certification by a reliable rabbi or kashrut supervision agency.

### **Which Animals Are Kosher?**

- **Mammals:** A mammal is kosher if it has split hooves and chews its cud. It must have both kosher signs. Examples: cows, sheep, goats and deer are kosher; pigs, rabbits, squirrels, bears, dogs, cats, camels and horses are not.
- **Fowl:** The Torah lists 24 non-kosher bird species—mostly predatory and scavenger birds. Kosher birds include chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys and pigeons.
- **Reptiles, amphibians, worms and insects:** With the exception of four types of locust, these are not kosher.
- **Fish & Seafood:** A water creature is kosher only if it has fins and scales. Examples: salmon, tuna, pike, flounder, carp and herring are kosher; catfish, sturgeon, swordfish, lobster, shellfish, crabs and all water mammals are not.

### **Blood Removal**

The blood of mammals and fowl is utterly forbidden for consumption according to the Torah. Within 72 hours of slaughter, all extractable blood is drained from the meat by a special soaking and salting process. (Today, most kosher meat is sold with the blood already removed.) The liver, which has an especially high blood content, needs to undergo a special broiling process before it can be eaten.

### **Meat and Milk**

Meat and milk are never combined. Separate utensils are used for each, and a waiting period is observed between eating them. Many observant Jewish homes have separate kitchens, or areas of the kitchen, to ensure separation, including two sinks, two dishwashers, and so on.

### **Kosher foods are divided into three categories:**

- **Meat** includes the meat or bones of mammals and fowl, soups or gravies made with them, and any food containing even a small quantity of the above.
- **Dairy** includes the milk of any kosher animal, all milk products made with it (cream, butter, cheese, etc.), and any food containing even a small quantity of the above.
- **Pareve** foods are neither “meat” nor “dairy.” Eggs are pareve, as are all fruits, vegetables and grains. Pareve foods can be mixed with and eaten together with either meat or dairy.

### **Meal Hand-Washing (Chabad.org)**

- Your table is an altar. You are the high priest. That plate of delicious morsels before you, that's the sacrifice. You do the ritual washing of hands, say a blessing on the food, and then dig in, to elevate all those carbs and proteins into a divine experience.
- Fill a cup with water and pour twice on your right hand. Repeat on the left. (Lefties: reverse the order.) Make sure the water covers your entire hand until the wrist bone with each pour. Separate your fingers slightly to allow the water in between them.
- After washing, lift your hands chest-high and say the following blessing: Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us concerning the washing of the hands.
- Rub your hands together and then dry them. Be careful not to speak or get involved in anything else until you've recited the blessing on your bread and swallowed some too.

***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 defiled hands?"***

For the Pharisees, to be a "good Jew" meant to carefully distinguish yourself from the surrounding society of both unobservant Jews and non-observant Gentiles, by following an extensive set of religious laws, behaviours and customs. They believed that only if the Hebrew people followed these laws meticulously, could the nation receive the blessing and favour of God. Breaking these laws would, they believed, result in destruction.

Despite having witnessed many of the miracles of Jesus, the Pharisees are nevertheless managing to focus only on his (and his disciples') observance of ritual tradition. Since their rules far exceeded the Biblical mandate, many Jews did not observe them – such as this ritual washing, which technically applied only to the priests working in the Temple (Exodus 30:18–21). Nowhere does the Bible stipulate that others must wash their hands for ritual purity.

***Exodus 30:18–21 "Make a bronze basin, with its bronze stand, for washing. Place it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it. Aaron and his sons are to wash their hands and feet with water from it. Whenever they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water so that they will not die. Also, when they approach the altar to minister by presenting a food offering to the Lord, they shall wash their hands and feet so that they will not die. This is to be a lasting ordinance for Aaron and his descendants for the generations to come."***

***Mark 7:6-8 - Jesus 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 merely human rules.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”***

Jesus outlines the basis of his conflict with the Pharisees: in their obsession with following the rules, they have lost any sense of what the commands of God are to do: to lead us to peace with God and with one another. Jesus insists that the Pharisees have drifted away from God. And he is about to give a devastating example.

***Mark 7:9-13 - 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.”***

Responsibility to care for one’s parents is central in Judaic teaching. This is especially true in the days when there was no social service safety net – once you were too old to earn a living, or widowed, you depended upon your children to provide for you.

The Hebrew word in the Torah in the verse regarding parents, “kavod,” does not really mean honour, which is an inadequate English translation. A better translation is “dignity.” Thus, the commandment is to dignify one’s father and mother, and to enable them to preserve their dignity.

Keeping parents clothed and fed when they can no longer do so for themselves retains their dignity. Similarly, assisting them with basic physical tasks preserves their dignity. Thus, the first commandment is to preserve a parent’s dignity at all costs...

Jesus indicated full agreement with this interpretation. In his dispute with the Pharisees, Jesus affirms that honouring one’s parents is connected with assuming responsibility for their dignity and care. Not even the most sacred religious obligation, says Jesus, excuses us from this responsibility.

Jesus uses the example of the practice known by the Hebrew word “Corban,” which involves dedicating your wealth and possessions to God. Oftentimes this vow took the form of a living will, where a person continues to enjoy their wealth and property until their

death, when it becomes property of the Temple. Other times, “Corban” meant dedicating a percentage of your income automatically to the work of the Temple.

But even this most worthwhile of practices, says Jesus, does not free us from the commandment to honour our parents, and to provide for the maintenance of their dignity. A human rule or vow does not supersede the greater commandment of care for another person. Jesus is accusing the Pharisees of placing obedience to man-made rules over the necessity of loving God, and your neighbour as yourself.

***Mark 7:14-19 - 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.” 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.)***

These are some of Jesus’ most dangerous words: he is effectively, as Mark points out, undermining the whole Kosher system of clean / unclean foods. Whether or not his listeners understood that at the time, the church came to (reluctantly) embrace this teaching, due to the work of both Peter (see Acts 10:9-16) and Paul.

The largest crisis faced by the early church was whether Christians were obligated to follow the extensive Kosher system of rules (often summarised as “circumcision”) – particularly those coming into the Christian faith who were not Jewish – itself a radical new idea. The dispute is “solved” in a major church conference detailed in Acts 15. Mark’s comment (*In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.*) reflects this revised understanding.

***Mark 7:20-23 - 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.”***

This statement of Jesus reflects his teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is reminding us that the rules exist to provide an external structure for the internal life – but it is that which is found “in the heart” which matters. For instance, hatred, which begins in the heart, is what leads to murder. “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” says Jesus, is as much about the hatred leading to the desire to kill, as it is about the external act itself.

*Mark 7:24-30 - Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. 25 In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. 26 The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.*

*27 “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” 28 “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” 29 Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” 30 She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

First of all, how did people know about Jesus in this foreign country, to the north of Israel (modern Lebanon), which Josephus describes as “our sworn enemy?” Earlier in Mark, we read (*Mark 3:8*) – *When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon.* Jesus’ fame has preceded him even there!

The main point for us to understand is that Jesus’ words to the woman, which seem cruel – implying that the woman was no better than a dog – are not directed at her, but are a reflection of the thinking of the disciples, who would culturally have considered her as such. It is a test, an example, and a lesson for them! How can we be sure of this?

- 1) Jesus does not resent the presence of those disturbing his rest. We know this from the story immediately previous, where the attempted escape from the crowds results in the Feeding of the 5000. Jesus, rather than resenting the crowds, has compassion upon them.
- 2) Jesus is not averse to speaking with women. He does so often in the Gospels, most notably the (also foreign) Samaritan woman at the well, in John 4 – a scene where again Jesus is described as tired, but makes time for the woman. But the disciples are amazed (John 4:27): ***“Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman.”*** Why? Because in their minds, a Samaritan woman was no better than a dog!
- 3) Jesus is not prejudiced against non-Jews and foreigners. There are a multitude of examples – the healing of the Centurion’s servant, and Jesus commending the Roman’s faith; his journeys into the pagan Decapolis; his parable of the Good Samaritan; his instruction to bring his teaching into all the world.

Given all of this, we can be certain that Jesus’ words did not reflect his own attitude, but he was putting into words the inner thoughts of his disciples – and demonstrating in his healing of the daughter that these prejudices were groundless.