

**YOU DISREGARD GOD’S COMMANDMENT BUT CLING TO HUMAN TRADITION - Biblical  
Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM**

**Mk 7,1-8.14-15.21-23**

*At that time, the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands. (For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles (and beds).) So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?" He responded, "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.' You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition.*

*He summoned the crowd again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile."*

*And said to his disciples: "From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile."*

Every time Jesus conveys life, immediately enemies of life appear.

As a matter of fact the evangelist writes *"the Pharisees with some scribes gathered around him"*. Scribes were the official theologians, the mastership of Judaic religion, *"who had come from Jerusalem"*. This time Jesus must have caused something serious because these eminent people even come from the Holy See of that time, the religious capital, Jerusalem.

One must ask himself “which serious damage did Jesus cause this time?”

Mark writes “*having observed that some of his disciples ate*” – and here is not ‘food’ as it was translated, but “*loaves with unclean hands*”. The evangelist is recalling the episode of sharing of loaves which, like it is for all evangelists, represents Eucharist, where Jesus didn’t require people to purify themselves before eating. That’s because – and this is the very meaning of Eucharist – one must not be clean to eat, but same eating makes him clean.

Well then, this freedom is shocking, and Pharisees and scribes rebuke Jesus “*why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders*”. According to them Moses received two Laws on Sinai. One was written, the other was oral (had the same value of the written one); this was the tradition of the elders and had the same value of the Word of God. “*But instead eat a meal with unclean hands?*”

Jesus’ reply is surprising. Jesus addresses – again, he’s in front of the highest representatives of religious hierarchy whose words were considered as the Word of God – to them by saying “*well did Isaiah prophesy about you!*” And maybe one expects a compliment ... “*Hypocrites!*” The word ‘hypocrite’ hadn’t a moral connotation as it is used today, but used to refer to an actor, the one who worked in theatre. The hypocrite was the one who used to act with a mask on his face.

And Jesus quotes Isaiah, chapt. 29, verse 13, “*This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are*” – the ‘heart’ in Hebraic world represented the mind, the conscience – “*far from me*”. Therefore, your worshipping, your religiousness is just a front, but you have other kind of interests.

Here comes Jesus’ decisive attack “*In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines*” – they claimed that disciples didn’t follow the tradition of the elders, Jesus discredits them, instead – “*human precepts*”.

They want to give divine authority to their lies which are set in order to rule. They say traditions are from God, when they know they are not, just to rule people.

As a matter of fact, Jesus accuses “*you disregard God’s commandment*”, the commandment of God is in favor of men, “*but cling to human tradition*”, for your own interests. Here is very pitiful to notice that liturgists distorted this text eliminating the passage of Korban, the sacred offerings to God, a passage saying that “*Honoring God, man was dishonored*”. This was all for their interests.

Then Jesus “*summoned the crowd again*” and addressing to everyone., says “*Hear me*”. This is a urging to carefully listen, but not only listening, also understanding. And Jesus does something really serious, so much as to be forced to rush off abroad. “*Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person*”. And what about the Book of Leviticus? It contains chapters specifying what is unclean and can defile man, making him unable to feel in communion with God. When then, here Jesus attacks harder. From criticism to oral law, Talmud, he even criticizes – and this is very strong – the written one. In fact – and this is another disasters by liturgists who eliminate very precious verses related to the disciples’ incomprehension – disciples were ready to stop with the oral law, but not with the written one.

There's a comment of the evangelist which is only present in Mark's gospel, which is very hard, "*Thus he declared all food clean*". That is Jesus denies the Book of Leviticus, which is the Word of God. What is written in the Book of Leviticus, the list of clean unclean food, doesn't represent God's will. This is so strong as to force him to escape to Tyre.

Here we find a very strong advice given by Jesus: what builds the relationship with God is not something outside man, or related to worship, but his behavior towards others. And here Jesus lists twelve attitudes which are not against religion, but against man.

The first one is – not "*unchastity*" how it was translated – but "*prostitutions*", not only meaning the practice of prostitution, but specifically selling oneself for carrier, for success or for ambition. There are twelve behaviors, but none of them regards God, and when a list was made in order to let others remember by heart, the first and the last items were the most important ones, for they were the most remembered. The first one is "*prostitutions*", the last is "*folly*", stupidity.

Fool, in Gospels, is the one who lives for himself and only looks after his own interests without becoming aware of others' needs. There's another advice that Jesus provides "*All these evils come from within and they defile*". According to Jesus, then, the difference between clean and unclean is not from God. Uncleaness arises from a wrong relationship with other men.