

Mark 6:53-56; Mark 7:1-4 Cleanliness and Uncleaness, Part 1

53 When they had crossed over they came to land at Gennesaret, and moored at the shore.

Mark concludes the events surrounding the feeding of the five thousand with Jesus' healing among the villages on the west side of the lake. The account of healing in the region of Gennesaret is the evangelist's summary of Jesus' activity. Gennesaret was a fertile plain three miles long by a mile wide on the west shore of the lake between Capernaum and Tiberius. It was the name of a town as well as a region, which was densely populated. "When they had crossed over, they beached the boats and came overland to Gennesaret."

54 And when they got out of the boat, immediately the people recognized Him, 55 and ran about that entire country and began carrying here and there on their pallets those who were sick, to wherever they heard He was.--

Though the people were not expecting Jesus, he was immediately recognized. He was well known from his ministry at Capernaum and reports of his healing power had spread throughout the entire region. The presence of Jesus created an immense excitement. People running from place to place as reports of his presence were received, carrying their sick on mattresses, paints the picture of a determined effort to get their sick family and friends to see Jesus—that this was an unexpected opportunity for healing. The healing of a paralyzed man who had been carried to Jesus on a mattress (Mark 2:1–12), as well as of others who had been brought to him (Mark 1:32–34), undoubtedly had been the subject of conversation in many towns and cities, and created this climate of expectation which greeted Jesus in Gennesaret.

56 And wherever He entered villages, or cities, or a countryside, they were laying the sick in the marketplaces and imploring Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak;

Whenever Jesus entered villages or cities, the report that he was coming had preceded him. He found the sick assembled in the marketplace or any open in anticipation of his arrival, convinced that if they could only touch the fringe of his garment they would be restored to health. Them begging "to let them touch even the edge of his cloak." Not only indicates their desperation, but that they may have heard of the healing of the woman with the issue of blood.

and all who touched it were being healed.--Jesus wanted to heal as many as wanted healing; whoever would be brought to Him, or come themselves in faith. The works of Jesus display a divine power, and the people treat him as a miracle worker or divine man whose power is released through touch. In this connection the absence of any reference to preaching or teaching activity is significant. He doesn't teach them at this time, because they are not ready to hear it. They only understand His power. Jesus patiently bears with their limited insight and graciously heals those who reach out to him in faith. The compassion of Jesus has fed, satisfied, and healed the crowds, but the blessings of his compassion raise the ultimate question whether those who experience them will enter further into Jesus' saving purpose.

Mark Chapter 7--Ritual Uncleaness--Since Mark is writing to a primarily Roman, gentile audience, he includes these explanations about Jewish attitudes toward ritual cleansing, and avoidance of defilement. His statement that all the other Jews did this too was a generalization, since people varied in their commitment to the OT law, and it was precisely the observance of such rules which marked out the members of the Pharisaic party from the Jews in general—most looked at it as a guideline, rather than a hard and fast rule. Generally, they washed their hands up to the wrist or elbow with a handful of water or two, or if possible, pouring water on the hands, especially when they have been in the marketplace to get food, and thus exposed to various possible sources of ritual impurity, and to purify themselves before eating.

These Pharisees from Jerusalem were there to augment and reinforce the local Pharisees in their concern over the ministry of Jesus (Mark 2:16, 24; 3:6). The reappearance here of Jerusalem scribes (first encountered in Mark 3:22), indicates a delegation from the capital specifically to investigate and/or to dispute with Jesus.

2 and saw that some of His disciples were eating their bread with unholy hands, that is, unwashed.--Jesus' teaching differed fundamentally from that of the Pharisees on essential points. This has already been illustrated with respect to sharing table-fellowship with outcasts (Mark 2:15–17), fasting (Mark 2:18–22) and Sabbath observance (Mark 2:23–28), and is now exhibited in regard to ritual defilement. This is about much more than a conflict between the scribes and Jesus. The eating of bread without proper concern for the removal of ritual defilement was pretext for confrontation. Its ultimate occasion was Jesus' evident disregard for the whole structure of oral tradition which sought to regulate every aspect of life, and which the Pharisees considered equal with, or even above God's Law, and binding upon all of Israel. And, of course caused conflict with Jesus. As in Mark 2:18, 23–24, it is the behavior of Jesus' disciples rather than his own actions which provides the point of dispute. The issue this time (as before) is not one of obedience to the OT laws, but of rules subsequently developed in Pharisaic circles. While no doubt it could normally be expected that hands would be washed before a meal for hygienic reasons (since food was often taken from a common dish), the only hand washing required in the OT for purposes of ritual purity is that of priests before offering sacrifice (Ex. 30:18–21; 40:30–32). The extension of this principle to the eating of ordinary food, and to Jewish people other than priests, a later addition. The disciples were the ones eating, but the Pharisees directed their question/accusation against Jesus. Among the scribes it was assumed that a teacher was responsible for the behavior of his disciples. The disciples were simply eating what they needed to satisfy their hunger. Once again, we see the Pharisees putting the letter of the law, and their interpretation of it, and tradition, ahead of what God had intended, making God's provision of food for the disciples something that they were supposed to feel ashamed of. Jesus brings this point up to them later next week in Mark 7:8–13 **8 Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.** **9 He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. 10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'The one who speaks evil of father or mother, is certainly to be put to death'; 11 but you say, 'If a person says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is, given to God),' 12 you no longer allow him to do anything for his father or his mother; 13 thereby invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that."** Well, what the Pharisees are doing in our verses today falls under the category of "many things such as that"—tradition above what God had said in the Law. And, it's interesting that the thrust of all these things done by the Pharisees were to make God's Law more constraining, and strict. Why is that? Because they were trying to impress each other on how much holier that they were by denying themselves even more things! God didn't say "let's see how much you can suffer for me", or "let's see how miserable you can make your life". He said "follow the Law that I have given you" and "do not add to it". Why? Because in their multiplying restrictions and prohibitions, they made it more and more difficult for people to follow the Pharisees interpretation of the Law. That's what Jesus meant when he said in Matthew 23:13 **13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut the kingdom of heaven in front of people; for you do not enter it yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.** Their impossible burden was too much, and people just gave up trying follow what they thought was an impossible law. But it wasn't God that put that burden on them, it was the Pharisees. Jesus brings this up in Matthew 23:2–4 **2 saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses. 3 Therefore, whatever they tell you, do and comply with it all, but do not do as they do; for they say things and do not do them. 4 And they tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as their finger.** They couldn't keep their own interpretation of the law that they were telling everyone else that they had to keep in order to see God, and go to heaven. And, the Pharisees weren't even being

honest about their ability to keep the law. They couldn't do it either, even though they wanted everyone else to believe that they did. Matthew 23:27-28 **27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you too, outwardly appear righteous to people, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.** So, the people gave up. And the Pharisees had no mercy or compassion on what they were doing to the people, because to change their ways would mean to admit that they themselves were hypocrites! Which is exactly what Jesus called them in Matthew 23:23-25 **23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the Law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!** God desires Mercy and not sacrifice. God wanted them to teach the people about the love and compassion and mercy of God, not about these multiplied rules. He wanted them to understand that they couldn't keep the law perfectly, and admit that they needed His help.

They were eating their bread—and likely it was the same miraculous bread that God had provided as leftovers from the Feeding of the 5,000. This is what the Pharisees were worried about as being unclean—a miracle directly from God! Talk about having everything backward! The most clean things like Jesus, the Bread of Life, and the miraculous loaves were the things that the Pharisees were calling unclean!

3 (For the Pharisees and all the other Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thereby holding firmly to the tradition of the elders; 4 and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they completely cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received as traditions to firmly hold, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, and copper pots.) --Mark provides a simple definition of defilement and a thumbnail sketch of Pharisaic practice. The biblical mandate that the priests had to wash their hands and feet prior to entering the Tabernacle (Ex. 30:19; 40:13) provided the foundation for the wide-spread practice of ritual washings in Judaism. The custom of washing the hands before eating bread was also grounded in priestly practice, in the conviction that daily food should be eaten as if it were priestly food. The Pharisees were convinced that the strict discipline of human conduct was necessary prelude to the true acknowledgment of God as sovereign. Jesus did not teach this. Instead He taught that there was nothing holy enough that people could do! Jesus had to provide the One and Only way!

It is probably with a little sarcasm that Mark includes just how far the Pharisees had taken this, with the sweeping reference to the oral tradition (**"and many other things there are, which they have received to hold"**) including "washing of cups and pots and copper vessels." There may be here a certain justifiable impatience with the mass of detail which was later codified in the Mishnah tractate Kelim (Vessels), but it has the effect of exposing the oral law to ridicule. What God had meant to keep the priests concerned with their holiness, the religious leaders had expanded into ridiculousness, to the point that God's law was disregarded.