

Gospel of Mark 13 – Chapter 6, verse 53 to chapter 7, verse 23 - Popularity and Opposition :-

In the Gospel of John, the 'Feeding of the Five Thousand' is set in the context of teaching on the Passover (John chapter 6, verses 25 – 71). This would mean that from chapter 7 onwards in both the Gospel of John and here in the Gospel of Mark, we are entering the last year of the Lord's ministry.

The heart of the Bible passage for this study is in the question and answer in the encounter with the 'Pharisees and scribes'. The fact that the Lord Jesus Christ publicly calls them hypocrites means that the confrontation with the authorities is now in the open. As a consequence the Lord Jesus deliberately avoids going into Judea and visits 'foreign parts' in the region of Tyre and Sidon in Syria.

Verses 53 – 56 – Healing in towns and villages:- These verses are a short summary of typical healing scenes when the Lord Jesus came to a different area. Word was quickly spread around and the sick brought out to where he would come. Note that "*the fringe of his garment*" refers to the 'tassel' which adult Jewish men were commanded to wear – see Numbers chapter 15, verses 37 – 41 and Deuteronomy chapter 22, verse 12. The popularity of the Lord Jesus is emphasised in this passage to contrast with the beginning of the next chapter.

Chapter 7, verses 1 – 4 – An Example of the Tradition of the Pharisees:- In these few verses Mark gives a brief outline of some of the traditions of the Pharisees which had been adopted by many of the Jews. This outline would have been important for the understanding of Gentile readers of the Gospel. Washing of hands and utensils was part of "*the tradition of the elders*" (verse 3). This '*tradition*' consisted of some 613 different rules which were meant to 'ring-fence' the Law and prevent any unforeseen infringement that may take place. The '*elders*' were teachers of the Law whose decisions on debatable points were handed down as tradition which was closely observed by the scribes and Pharisees.

Verses 5 – 13 – A Specific Question leads to Condemnation:- Why do some of the disciples of the Lord Jesus eat without ritually cleansing their hands? The Lord Jesus sees this as only one part of a wider issue, which is the way that he himself and his disciples do not conform their lives as a whole to the demands of the Pharisees' code. For the early Christians this was an important question which had to be addressed with regard to their future mission to the gentile world. The incident referred to by Paul in his Letter to the Galatians, chapter 2, verses 11 – 21 is a good example of the tensions in the early church. The implications of this were debated and a decision made by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, recorded in Acts chapter 15, verses 1- 21. The reply of the Lord Jesus is first to quote from Isaiah chapter 29, verse 13 which is interpreted to mean that the Pharisees follow their own oral tradition at the expense of the written Law. This is followed by an example which shows a deliberate use of the oral tradition to avoid the responsibility laid down by the written Law. The suggestion by some commentators is that there was a local example of the son denying help to his parents by vowing to give his income as a gift to God. This is used by the Lord Jesus Christ to condemn the use of the tradition to avoid having to keep the written Law.

Verses 14 – 15 – Teaching for the 'Crowd':- The Lord Jesus wanted the thrust of his teaching to be imparted to a wider audience than just the scribes and the Pharisees. He specifically "*called the crowd to him again*" to share a basic lesson. It is not what a person eats that defiles them but evil thoughts and desires from within.

Verses 16 – 23 – Teaching for the Disciples:- His disciples, as so often, want a further explanation of the 'parable'. The Lord Jesus says that it is obvious that food does not make us 'unclean'. Again it is worth referring to the passage in Acts chapter 15, verses 1 – 21. and to the vision of Peter in Acts chapter 11, verses 1 – 18. "*From within, out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, . . .*" this is where the problem lies, this is where we need the inner cleansing that only the Lord can give!

For further reflection Psalm 51 is a good place to start, especially verses 6 – 12. For an assurance of forgiveness read the First Epistle of John, chapter 1, verse 5 through to chapter 2, verse 6