



## Sermon Transcript

### February 11, 2018

## Gospel of Mark: The Good News of Jesus

### Confused, Surprised and Unexpected

### Mark 7:1-30 and 8:1-21

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on February 11, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

## Sermon Text

### Mark 7:1-30

<sup>1</sup> Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup> (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, <sup>4</sup> and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) <sup>5</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” <sup>6</sup> And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; <sup>7</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’” <sup>8</sup> You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

<sup>9</sup> And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! <sup>10</sup> For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’” <sup>11</sup> But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— <sup>12</sup> then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, <sup>13</sup> thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

<sup>14</sup> And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup> There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” <sup>17</sup> And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. <sup>18</sup> And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, <sup>19</sup> since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) <sup>20</sup> And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. <sup>21</sup> For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

<sup>24</sup> And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. <sup>25</sup> But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and

came and fell down at his feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." <sup>28</sup> But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup> And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." <sup>30</sup> And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

### **Mark 8:11-21**

<sup>11</sup> The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. <sup>12</sup> And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." <sup>13</sup> And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.

<sup>14</sup> Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. <sup>15</sup> And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." <sup>16</sup> And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. <sup>17</sup> And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? <sup>18</sup> Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? <sup>19</sup> When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." <sup>20</sup> "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." <sup>21</sup> And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

### **Introduction**

It is all so confusing. It is all so surprising. It is all so unexpected. What is so confusing? What is so surprising? What is so unexpected? Jesus!

Clearly, over the last several weeks as we have made our way through the Gospel of Mark, the disciples are confused about Jesus. Our passage ends this morning in Mark 8:21 with Jesus asking the disciples, "*Do you not yet understand?*" Next week we will be in the passage where we will hear Peter confess his belief that Jesus is the Christ, that is the promised Messiah. But his impression of what that means is different than what Jesus has come to do. And so next week, we will see the first of three conversations Jesus

has with the disciples where he begins to explain his pending death on the cross. It is all so confusing. It is all so surprising. It is all so unexpected.

You could say the same thing about the group we encounter this morning. This morning, we encounter the Jewish religious leaders and they too are confused about Jesus. The only difference is that their confusion leads them to condemn and oppose Jesus. They are reintroduced to us in Mark 7:1, *“Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem.”* It all sounds so official. A delegation had arrived from the religious center of Israel, Jerusalem. It is an introduction that is meant to convey that the official opposition to Jesus has arrived. But we are not surprised to find this group clashing with Jesus. Already, in Mark 3, they aligned the works of Jesus with the works of Satan. And now somewhat confused with Jesus they come asking, *“Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”* And then later, in Mark 8:11, they argued with Jesus and tested him by asking him to produce some kind of *“sign from heaven”* to prove that he was indeed the Messiah. In their defiant and obstinate tone against Jesus, they too demonstrate that they do not truly understand Jesus. Unlike the disciples, though, their lack of understanding of Jesus leads to a heart that is far from God.

Part of the purpose for walking through the Gospel of Mark is for us to pause and take a good fresh look at Jesus. Don't forget, the religious leaders were “religious.” That is a category that most of us would fall into. We are a religious people. We adhere to a religion, namely Christianity. Where do we tend to be confused? How does Jesus surprise us? What unexpected things are you discovering about Jesus? I hope you are making discoveries about Jesus as we make our way through Mark. That is the beauty of the inexhaustible nature of Jesus. When Paul says in Philippians 3:8, *“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”* he says it in a way that this knowing of Jesus is an ongoing and developing and deepening knowledge of Jesus. He adds in verse 10 that his life mission is, *“that I may know him.”* It implies that his knowledge of Jesus is ever growing. So as we walk through the Gospel of Mark, may it lead to a deepening knowledge of Jesus. May confusions be lessened and from time to time, when you turn the page may Jesus surprise you with the unexpected.

Perhaps there are some here who are taking this journey through the Gospel of Mark and this is some of your first exposure to Jesus. I am excited for you. Be open to what you are hearing about Jesus. Jesus has a surprising way of making himself known to people. I like reading the stories of those who make the surprising discovery of who Jesus is and what he has done. Here are some of the titles to the stories of those who to

their surprise found Jesus. Rosaria Butterfield wrote a book about her faith story and the title of the book was *The Secret thoughts of An Unlikely Convert*. Here is her opening line to the first chapter of her story. “How do I tell you about my conversion to Christianity without making it sound like an alien abduction or a train wreck? Truth be told, it felt like a little of both.”<sup>1</sup> Mary Poplin’s story includes the tag line, “I fancied myself a free spirit and a good person. God showed me I was neither.”<sup>2</sup> Mark Clark describes his surprising journey to God as “A Skeptic Learns to Doubt his Doubts.” He adds, “when my father died, questions about God and eternity started flooding my mind.”<sup>3</sup> Lily Burana, describes her surprising journey to Jesus by saying, “I was parked between ‘spiritual but not religious’ when depression threw me into God’s arms.”<sup>4</sup> As these people look back on their journey to faith in Jesus, you can hear how Jesus still has a way of surprising us. Some of you are sitting here this morning and a couple years ago, you would have never thought you would be sitting where you are sitting. And yet, as you encounter Jesus in his Word and through his people, your heart is being strangely warmed towards him. You don’t have to wait until every confusion is cleared up first before you turn to him in faith. Turn to Jesus in faith. I am glad you are here.

As we get ready to look at our passage this morning, let me tell you what Mark is trying to show us about Jesus. Mark is doing more than just stringing stories together. Through the way he arranges his material he is telling us what we need to know about Jesus. So first of all, in Mark 7:1-23, Mark is clearing up the confusion that the religious leaders had about what it means to be defiled or unclean. This is important to clear up because it is their confusion that leads to their rejection of Jesus and ultimately to their judgment. And then from Mark 7:24 to Mark 8:10 there are three miracle stories. And do you know what is unique about these stories? All three of them involve Gentiles. And this is what so surprising about Jesus. He is reshaping the people of God. And finally, when we get to Mark 8:11-21 and we hear the religious leaders asking for a sign, Here Mark is leading us to the cross of Jesus. No doubt, this was most unexpected.

### **Clearing the Confusion about My Heart**

Our passage begins with a confrontation between the religious leaders and Jesus. This confrontation reveals that the religious leaders are confused. They are confused about what really makes a person defiled or unclean. Why is this such a concern? Well we know from Leviticus 20:7 and from 1 Peter 1:16, the Old Testament and the New Testament, that God says “*You shall be holy, for I am holy.*” So the concern is a legitimate concern. But the confusion rests in what it is that really defiles a person and consequently, how one is made holy.

In our passage this morning, the religious leaders observed that the disciples of Jesus *“ate with hands that were defiled, that is unwashed.”* Their concern about the washing of hands had nothing to do with personal hygiene. Rather, this gets to the heart of the Jewish religious sensibilities of the day. In fact, Mark is writing to a Gentile audience and he has to put in parenthesis, in verses 3-4, an explanation for his Gentile readers what the Pharisees were talking about. *“(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)”* And so they ask Jesus in verse 5, *“Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”*

We do know from Exodus 30:19 that the priests were required to wash their hands and feet before they entered the tabernacle to perform their duties. This ritual cleansing was the last thing a priest would do before entering the presence of God on behalf of the people. This ritual cleansing was a symbol of the need to be clean in order to enter the presence of God. But over time, what was prescribed for the priests was adopted by the religious leaders and the people. From two centuries prior to Jesus to three centuries after Jesus, this tradition of *“all the Jews”* observing this religious ritual went from being voluntary to being mandatory. William Lane says of this tradition, *“Its finest intention was the demonstration that all Israel was devoted to God and the Law.”*<sup>5</sup> And so they couldn’t understand why the disciples, and Jesus for that matter, were lacking in such devotion to God. *“Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”*

The response of Jesus to these religious leaders is pretty strong. He calls them hypocrites. He says that their practice of religion is merely outward while their hearts are far from God. In the first place, God never prescribed that all of Israel should observe the ritual of ceremonial washing. It is not to say that there isn’t a place for traditions and rituals. This week, many Christians around the world will take ashes and have them applied to their forehead to mark the beginning of Lent. It is a man made tradition. There is something good in this tradition. It reminds us that we are but dust and to dust we will return. That is a good thing that leads to a posture of repentance. At the same time, when the human tradition becomes just an outward expression apart from true repentance, it means nothing. Even traditions that have been prescribed for us, like prayer and fasting can easily be nothing more than external actions. In Isaiah 58 the prophet observes that their religious observance is merely an external exercise. While they observe the external religious exercise on one hand, on the other hand they

take advantage of their workers, neglect the poor and they are found fighting and quarreling among each other. Like the Pharisees, their religious ritual supersedes the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

That is the same problem with the religious leaders who are confronting Jesus. First of all, Jesus points out how often their traditions keep them from observing the very thing God has commanded. For example, instead of honoring their parents by taking care of them in their old age, they were able to shelter some of their assets by dedicating them to the temple thus freeing them from caring for the needs of their parents. But then Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. The issue of being defiled or unclean is not an external issue. You can't take soap and water and wash away your guilt. You can't be made right with God through outward religious observance. Your problem is an internal problem. Jesus says in verses 20-23, *"What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."*

This was the point of confusion for the Jewish religious leaders who confronted Jesus. Through keeping their rituals, they developed a spiritual pride that caused them to become blind to their own sinful hearts. In Romans 2, Paul makes the case that the religious Jew is just as sinful as the pagan Gentile. At least the Jew has the revelation of God. The commandments of God were given to them. But even though they have the commandments, they still break them. Why is that? It is because *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* No external ritual is able to clean the heart.

Coming here on a Sunday morning is a ritual. It is a good and important thing we do. But doing this every Sunday is not what makes you right with God. No external act can clean the heart. I think of that story of the two men who came to the communion rail in the Church of England. One of the men was an ex-con who did his time and was now trying to live a responsible life. Standing next to him, to receive the bread and the cup was one of the highest judges in all the land of England. At the end of the service, the judge said to the pastor, "did you see who was standing next to me when I received communion?" The pastor had taken notice and he knew the story of the ex-con and the pastor said, "I did." The judge said in response, "What amazing grace." To which the pastor said, "Amen!" "Who do you think I am referring to?", asked the judge? "Well, the ex-con," said the pastor. "No, I am referring to myself. I grew up in the church and lived a respectable life. I occupy one of the highest offices in the land. It is God's grace that reminds me that I am just as much in need of Christ as the ex-con." That is what

the religious leaders failed to understand. It is what you must understand. Only Jesus can clean up the heart. William Lane says, “the capacity for fellowship with God is not destroyed by material uncleanness of food or hands; it is destroyed by personal sin.”<sup>6</sup> It is the sin that lives inside of all of us that defiles us. That you must understand.

## **The Surprising Nature of God’s People**

It is very fascinating what comes next in Mark’s Gospel. In rather rapid fashion we read of three more miracle stories. First we encounter a mother who pleads for her daughter who is under the influence of a demon. Jesus heals her. Next he heals a deaf man and then he feeds four thousand people with just a few loaves of bread. After these three stories, comes another contentious encounter with the Pharisees.

You can make a good case that each of these three miracles were performed primarily among the Gentiles. In the first miracle, Mark comes out and says that this woman was a Gentile and that Jesus was in Gentile territory. The second miracle happens on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, in a Gentile region known as the Decapolis. This is not to suggest that Jews didn’t live in that region, they did. But by telling us that Jesus was in this region, seems to imply, that at the very least, this miracle was performed among Gentiles and quite possibly it was a Gentile who was healed. And then the feeding of the four thousand begins in Mark 8:1 by saying, “*In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered.*” That opening phrase is linked to what comes before it, thus placing the feeding of the four thousand in the area of the Decapolis. I would imagine that this miracle was done among a mixed crowd, but predominantly made of Gentiles.

There are so many things about this that are surprising. We just came from a passage where Jesus was confronted by the religious leaders over what makes a person defiled. Most Jews in the first century thought that contact with a Gentile would make you unclean. In John 18:28, when the religious leaders brought Jesus to Pilate it says that they did not go into the governor’s headquarters “so *that they would not be defiled.*” Gentiles were unclean because . . . they were Gentiles. That is why the Jew washed their hands before they ate and when they came back from the market and why they washed their pots. What if they had brushed up against a Gentile and unknowingly became defiled. And here Jesus is, with Gentiles. It is all so surprising.

We are only going to look at the first of these three miracles this morning. You might find it surprising to hear how Jesus first responds to this woman. At the least, Jesus comes across as off-putting, if not harsh. This woman is a mother and her daughter is



possessed by an unclean spirit. She came to Jesus, on behalf of her daughter, begging Jesus to deliver her daughter from the demon. The initial response of Jesus is surprising. He seemingly rebuffs her request by saying, *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”* Did he just call her “a dog”? Well that was a common racial slur that the Jews would often direct towards Gentiles. But the word for “dog” here is not that slur that refers to the mangy dog that roams the street. Rather, it is a reference to the beloved domestic pet.

Israel had been established as the children of God. And so when Jesus says, *“Let the children be fed first”* he is recognizing his first purpose is to proclaim the kingdom to the Jews. And so just like you wouldn't take your children's food and give it to the dog, the mission of Jesus and the message of the gospel is first to be proclaimed to the Jew and then to the Gentile. And yet, Jesus just came from a scene where he had been rejected by the Jewish religious leaders. When the Jewish religious leaders asked Jesus why his disciples do not keep the tradition of the elders, Jesus responded to them with condemning words in Mark 7:6-8. *“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”* What is of interest here is not just what he said, but from where he gets his words. He is quoting from Isaiah 29. It is a passage that pronounces judgment on the ancient spiritual leaders of Israel. It is in this passage the destruction of Jerusalem is foreshadowed, when the people will be sent into exile into a foreign land. In a few chapters from now, Mark 13, Jesus foretells of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, which happens in 70 AD. And it leaves you wondering, who are the people of God?

Clearly the woman is not offended by what Jesus says. And with humility and great faith, she turns to Jesus and says, *“Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.”* I don't think Jesus was rebuffing her as much as he was testing her. She provides an example of faith that exceeds the religious leaders and even the disciples. She becomes a demonstration to us that it is faith in Jesus that makes us part of the people of God. David Garland summarizes this passage so well when he says, *“The reader should grasp the implication that God will heal Gentiles, no matter how unclean or how far away from God they may seem. Others might dismiss someone as the wrong race, nationality or social class, or as from the wrong religious background, but none of these things prevents one from receiving God's merciful healing. Those who exercise humble faith will receive bread.”*<sup>7</sup> Don't be surprised that Jesus would forgive you. Like this woman, turn to him in faith. He will not withhold his mercy from you.

## The Unexpected Sign of the Cross

This brings us to Mark 8:11, where we encounter another interchange between Jesus and the religious leaders. Mark writes, *“The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.”* Now on one hand, you read this and you want to look at the religious leaders and ask, “What more do you want?” We noted last week that in the Gospel of John, John called the miracles signs. Pick any sign you want. When the paralytic was lowered down from the roof, he was dropped right in front of the religious leaders when Jesus said, *“pick up your bed and go home.”*

But here is what they are asking for when they ask for a sign. They are asking for a sign that feeds their notion of what the Messiah will come and do. Their view of a Messiah is that the Messiah will come and deliver them from their enemies and vanquish the Gentile powers. By asking for a sign from heaven they are looking for some kind apocalyptic display of power that will give them some indication that the kingdom of God—their view of the kingdom—is breaking into this world. And so, Jesus *“sighed deeply in his spirit and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.”* Later he warns the disciples of the danger of the unbelief of the religious leaders and Herod. *“Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”*

Isn't it interesting that this request comes after the feeding of the four thousand? It is a miracle that points to the blessing of the Gentiles and not their destruction. Garland says it this way, “Jesus refuses to give the Pharisees a sign from heaven because God has sent him to give his life on the cross for all humanity, not to smash the enemies of Israel or to give the nation political mastery of the world.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, in Matthew 12 when these religious leaders ask for a sign, Jesus says, *“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the belly of the earth.”*

So what is the unexpected sign that Jesus is the Messiah? It is the cross. It is so unexpected that God would come in the flesh and die on the cross so that we might live. For the next three weeks we are going to look at three conversations Jesus has with his disciples to help them understand the unexpected journey Jesus will take to the cross. The disciples had no trouble claiming Jesus to be the Messiah. Peter will make that confession next week. What was unexpected was that he would die. But it is through the cross our defiled hearts are made clean. It is through faith in the finished work of the cross, we are brought in to the family of God. Jew and Gentile are made one.

## Conclusion

It is all so confusing. It is all so surprising. It is all so unexpected. That is how we began this morning. When you put it all together, here is what you have. We are all defiled before God because of our sin. Everyone of us. But the surprising thing about God is that if we confess our sin and turn in faith to Jesus, he will forgive us and make us his people. We are the family of God through faith. How do I know he will do that for me? Well look to the most unexpected thing you could imagine—the cross. That is the sign he gives us to assure us of his love for us. The perfect Son of God took your punishment and my punishment and atoned for our sins. Don't delay. Be like that woman and humble yourself and turn in faith to Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup>Rosaria Butterfield *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publishers, 2014) Kindle Reader, Location 128

<sup>2</sup>Mary Poplin "This Is Who You Are" in *Christianity Today* January/February 2018 95-96

<sup>3</sup>Mark Clark "A Skeptic Learns to Doubt his Doubts" in *Christianity Today* December 2017 79-80

<sup>4</sup>Lily Burana "Defeating the Darkness Inside" in *Christianity Today* November 2017 95-96

<sup>5</sup>William Lane *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 246

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 258

<sup>7</sup>David Garland *Mark: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 290

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 309

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS

### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Read Isaiah 40:31. What word stands out to you in this verse? Hint: Revelation 3:7
2. What is something you are looking forward to and what is something that concerns you? (Share either one or both)
3. Read Philippians 3:8-11. What is the aim of Paul's life? How has this study in the Gospel of Mark helped you in your growing knowledge of Jesus? Pray to this end before you start your discussion on the sermon.

### Diving Into The Word

4. Read Mark 7:1-23. What did the religious leaders fail to see about themselves? What are the things that lead to spiritual pride? How do verses 21-23 help us maintain a humble spirit?
5. Read Mark 7:24-30. What do you find surprising about Jesus here? How does this story speak against our own prejudice? What is it that binds us all together in the body of Christ?
6. Read Mark 8:11-13 (See also Matthew 12:38-40). What sign does Jesus give that he is the Messiah? Why is this so unexpected? How is the cross still the sign we point to and why does it remain a stumbling block to people?
7. Read Mark 8:14-21. How are we often forgetful like the disciples? How is Jesus patient with us?

### Taking It Home

8. Based on what insight you gained from your study, each person offer a "thank you prayer" and a "help me prayer." Thank God for an insight you gained and ask him to help you with something you need to do as a result of your conversation.