

The Problem of Sin and The Triumph of Faith

Mark 7:17 – 30

Proposition: Food has no power to defile our conscience. What defiles is sin lurking in our hearts but faith triumphs over sin.

Application: Persist in asking the Lord until He answers your prayer. Be content with the crumbs of God's grace. When you lack faith rely on others to seek the Lord on your behalf. Receive a new heart from the Lord.

Little Isaac was so proud of himself for baking a birthday cake for his mom. Chocolate cake being her weakness, she gulped down the entire thing. When she was done, little Isaac gladly explained: “*I’m so happy you liked the cake I made you. I’m sorry – there should have been 32 candles on it, but they’re all gone when I took the cake out of the oven!*” What we eat can make us feel queasy, but food has no power to defile our conscience. What defiles is sin lurking in our hearts but faith in Christ Jesus triumphs over sin.

I. Inside the Heart (7:17 – 23)

Food Cannot Defile (7:17 – 19): Our digestive system does not affect our standing before God. It simply extracts nutrients from the food we eat which is then used to build up our body. What has no nutritional value, is expelled as waste in the sewer. What we eat is an issue of physiology not soteriology; it is a physical matter not a spiritual one. Foods do not affect our standing with the Lord. Since food has no power to defile, all foods are clean. Jesus is not doing away with food laws. What Jesus means vis-à-vis this statement is that whether Kosher or non-kosher, food has no power to defile. Sanctification is not enhanced or diminished by the food we eat. In this way, all foods are clean because no food has power to impact our sanctification. This does not mean all foods should be eaten. Some foods carry a higher risk of disease. This may be one reason why the Lord brought in food laws. For instance, pigs are notorious for carrying parasites because they eat whatever we throw at them, and they roll around in dung most of their lives. Therefore, pork must be cooked well to avoid getting a parasitic disease such as *trichinosis*. Shellfish are also deemed not kosher because they are scavengers living at the bottom of the ocean. As scavengers they feed on the waste of other marine animals. Scavenger fish have a higher toxic load and therefore may affect our health over time. God likely brought in food laws for *health reasons*. Food laws also have a symbolic purpose. Just as some foods are deemed clean and others unclean some habits are sinful and other habits are not sinful. The physical distinction between clean and unclean foods, points to a spiritual distinction between holy and unholy habits (Lev 11:46, 47). A third reason the Lord brought in food laws was to set Israel apart from the nations. The word *holy* does not only mean *morally pure* it also means *set apart*. For instance, items in the temple were called *holy* because they were set apart in service of God (Ezra 8:28).

Food laws had a health benefit, a symbolic purpose, and they set Israel apart from the nations. Since foods are morally neutral, all foods are clean. It is not food that destroys homes. Eating pork does not ruin families; chomping on shellfish does not collapse societies or generate wars. So, what defiles a person?

From Within Comes Defilement (7:20 – 23): Our sanctification is not affected by food that goes in our stomach but by the garbage that comes out of our mouth. Sin begins in the heart (Jer 17:9, 10). Notice the link between heart and deeds. Evil thoughts unite with our will to produce evil conversation and sinful conduct. The Lord Jesus scans our hearts and gives an x-ray picture of what is inside. He unmask the evil we carry around in our hearts. The first six sins are plural. This speaks to the diverse ways we sin. For instance, there is a wide range of sexual sin a person can commit. The next six sins are singular – this speaks to our attitudes – such as lacking self-control (*sensuality*); or bearing a grudge toward others for what they have (*envy*); or having a swollen view of ourselves thinking we are better than others (*pride*). Bible scholar Dr. Hiebert once said *man is the fountain of his own uncleanness*. We are not able to change our sinful nature. The Lord Jesus offers to do a heart transplant switching out our defiled heart with a new righteous heart (Ezek 36:26, 27). We receive a new heart only by the grace of God through our faith in Christ Jesus.

Having discussed the problem of sin Jesus now rewards a display of faith.

II. Under the Table (7:24 – 30)

Faith at Work (7:24 – 26): Jesus and the 12 ventured deep into the heart of a pagan culture. Tyre is in modern day Lebanon. This is the only time Jesus journeyed outside the borders of Israel. He did minister to Gentiles, but that ministry took place in Israel. Taking the Gospel outside the borders of Israel and the faith response of this woman foreshadows the success of the Gospel ministry among Gentile nations. Jesus did not wish to carry out a public ministry in this region. If He engaged in a prolonged ministry, it would likely close the door to any further ministry in Israel.

Knowing that Jesus had power to cast out demons, when the mother heard He was in town she right away went to Him in worship. Picture the heart break of this woman. Her little daughter was haunted by demons. Her deep love for her needy daughter turned this mother into an intercessor. The verb *kept asking* means to persist in our plea. She was so steadfast in her asking the 12 tried to shoo her away (Matt 15:21 – 25). Notice in the Matthew passage it says *He did not answer her* (15:23a). At times our prayers meet divine silence. We feel God does not hear us. What do we do? We press on! We keep on asking! We keep on pleading until we receive an answer from the Lord. Divine silence does not always mean divine refusal, but it does mean we must persist in our asking.

Notice three proofs of this woman's faith: She hastened to go to the Lord Jesus with her problem; she declared that Jesus was the Messiah (*Son of David*); she persisted in her asking. Jesus explained why He did not answer her at first. *His ministry was confined to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. Even though for the most part the Jewish nation refused Jesus as their Messiah their status as God's covenant nation required, they have first claim to His messianic ministry.

First the Children (7:27, 28): After Pentecost the Gospel mission spreads out to the Gentiles. When we drop a pebble in water waves move out from the center. In the same way the Gospel mission began with Israel and moved outward from there. Going first to the lost sheep of Israel was an order of priority not preference. Jesus was careful to preserve the order (Acts 1:8; Rom 1:16). In case we might think God is partial to Israel as His chosen nation consider this: not only does the Gospel begin with the Jew so does judgment (Rom 2:9). Some Christians are zealous for judgement to come upon Israel. Church history is full of such zeal. Even in the present we hear calls for the demise of the state of Israel. We should be zealous to reach the Jewish people with the Gospel. Paul grieved that Israel stood first in judgement. But he was also zealous to offer the Gospel to the Jew first. Unless you are zealous to reach the Jewish people with the Gospel then you have no right to be zealous for their judgement!

Salvation blessings is a matter of priority not of preference. The Gospel mission must have a starting point. The starting point is with Israel.

Is Jesus being rude to this distraught mother? The Greek word used for *dog* is *kunarion* which does not refer to a wild dog but a little puppy dog – a household pet, loved and cared for by the family. Household pets are not children of the household, but they do have a role in the household. When compared to the blessings granted to Israel, the pagan nations were like household pets – not yet fit to eat at the table but allowed to eat the surplus. This will change after Pentecost. The *bread* speaks of the blessings of salvation.

Notice the woman did not dispute what Jesus said. She did not challenge His words. She did not deny the priority of Israel with respect to God's plan of salvation. She simply answered *Yes, Lord*. She knew the Person standing before her was able to do something about her little daughter's anguish. She was content with second place. All she desired was to receive any crumbs of grace the Lord Jesus had to give. She was like the prodigal who returned home content with just being one of his father's hired hands.

This woman's faith faced many hurdles: the demons were against her; it seemed the disciples were against her; she was a female; she was pagan; but her faith triumphed. Her faith was displayed in four ways: She went to the Lord Jesus with her problem; she declared He was the Messiah; she persisted in her plea; and finally, she took Jesus at His word.

Faith Rewarded (7:29, 30): The Lord rewards those who seek Him in faith (Heb 11:6). Twice in the Gospels Jesus remarks about a person's great faith. The two times He observed *great faith* on display was with this woman and with a Roman soldier. Both were Gentiles (Matt 15:28; Luke 7:9); both miracles were performed in response to faith; both miracles were performed at a distance. By not going into Gentile homes Jesus was showing us that He can heal without being physically present. After His ascension into heaven all healings will be done at a distance. These two healings at a distance foreshadow that as the Gospel goes out among the nations, Jesus will heal at a distance. The faith of this mom did not need more than a word from the Lord. With His word she went back to her beloved child. Faith takes God at his Word. Faith will not let go of the promise until it comes to pass. This mother found a healthy child and a wonderful Saviour.

Parents if you are distressed over your child's spiritual or physical state plead for them. You may feel God is not hearing your prayers. Press on! Keep on asking! Keep on pleading until you receive an answer from the Lord. God's silence means we must persist in our asking.

You may feel you do not deserve to have an answer from God. You may feel your not good enough to receive from Him. Believe anyway. Persist still. Partake of the crumbs. Even a crumb of God's grace is enough to meet needs.

The troubled daughter did not go to the Lord, her mother did. Sometimes we lack faith to receive the crumbs of God's grace. But we can rely on the faith of others to plead with the Lord on our behalf. One of the blessings of being in Life Group community is we can ask others in our group to entreat the Lord on our behalf.

Sin keeps us from sitting at the table. Sin keeps us from receiving salvation blessings. Jesus came to solve our sin problem by giving us a heart transplant. If your desire is to receive a new heart, then admit your sin. Believe Jesus died for your sin and rose again on the third day. Call on Him for salvation. He will give you a new heart. He will make you His own. As you partake of His salvation blessings you will find Him to be a wonderful Saviour.