

## Exegetical Brief on Mark 7:19: “Who or what makes all foods clean?”

*Paul E. Zell*

It's not your hands that make you unclean. Not the foods you eat. Not what your rituals must first wash away. Not what's on the outside. No, it's what's on the inside. What's in your heart. This is what makes you unclean before your holy God.

In the Gospel for the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year B) Jesus takes misguided disciples to task. “Don't you see,” he asks, “that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean?’” (Mk 7:18)<sup>1</sup> In his day some were convinced that the oft-repeated ritual of rinsing the hands with water before meals was sufficient to satisfy God. Here is a question to challenge such views. Here is a timely question also for the present-day disciple, including the one who has never read about the Pharisees' traditions. Bowing the head and folding the hands for prayer; standing for the reading of the Gospel; kneeling for the sacrament; shushing the little kids upon entering an empty church -- for all the admirable reasons behind our many little rituals (and there are many!), our manmade traditions cannot wash away our inbred depravity. Jesus seals the argument by pointing to the hard evidence of that which lurks inside each of us.

“What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’” (Mk 7:20-23)

No matter how fastidious that individual may be with his rites and rituals, his dirty heart will produce numerous dirty desires and deeds.

Go back to the searching question that Jesus posed: “Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean?’” (Mk 7:18) To explain his point, Jesus uses a clever illustration. Consider what happens with the food you eat, he suggests. Whether that food is ritually clean or unclean, washed or unwashed, it doesn't go into your heart. Food itself neither corrects nor corrupts your innermost desires. Rather, whatever impurities your food may have, God designed the human body to use that which is good and to remove that which is impure. All food enters the stomach and the digestive tract (*κοιλία*), and its impurities are deposited in the latrine (*ἀφεδρών*, Mk 7:19). In and of itself, then, your food has no moral implications.

Four words (*καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα*) bring this verse to a close. A straightforward translation: “cleansing all foods.” A challenging question: Who or what is it that makes all foods clean? Many see *καθαρίζων* (a nominative singular present tense participle) as agreeing with the subject of the verb *λέγει* back at the start of verse 18. In other words, *καθαρίζων* is a circumstantial

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture passages are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

participle modifying λέγει and referring to what Jesus was doing while speaking the words recorded in vv 18-19. Thus the NIV translation: “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.”<sup>2</sup>

Commentators then speculate that St. Mark is chiming in with his own brief observation. The evangelist known as “Peter’s interpreter” is interjecting what the apostle learned about once-forbidden meats when he was on the rooftop at Joppa: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (Ac 9:15; 11:9). To show that this is St. Mark’s editorial aside, translators enclose these words in parentheses.

The problem with this interpretation is two-fold. For one thing, there is nothing in this chapter about the foods God had declared unclean at Sinai. The meats prohibited from the Israelite diet (Lev 11; Dt 14) are not the issue here. Jesus rather is addressing human traditions that capture attention while hearts remain far from God. Secondly, there is the matter of timing. Jesus certainly is not “declaring all foods clean” at this point in his ministry. Far from it. He who was “born under law” (Gal 4:4) lived under the dietary restrictions of God’s old covenant till the end of his days. He expected the same of his Jewish disciples. Peter acknowledged this at Joppa: “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean” (Ac 10:14). If Jesus were the one cleansing (καθαρίζων) all foods somewhat early in his public ministry, why would Peter so emphatically speak of them as unclean (ἀκάθαρτον)? No, it was only when his obedient life ended at the cross that our Redeemer cancelled the written code with all its regulations, including those that prohibited certain foods.<sup>3</sup> It was only after Easter and Pentecost that his apostles were in the position to declare all foods clean.<sup>4</sup>

Here at Mark 7:19 the most unadorned interpretation is the preferred one. The phrase καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα can simply be translated “cleansing all foods,” and it need not be placed in parentheses and regarded as an editorial aside. These rather are Jesus’ own words as he completes his illustration. The passage then reads, “Don’t you understand that nothing which comes from the outside and enters into the person is able to defile him, since it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach and passes out into the latrine, cleansing all foods” (essayist’s translation). Might the foods that arrived unwashed from the market place be prepared in unwashed pots and pans and eaten with unwashed hands by diners reclining on unwashed couches? (See Mark 7:1-4.) Do not be alarmed, Jesus is saying. Do not be so concerned about what manmade rituals demand. Your body has a remarkable process for purifying all foods and depositing the impurities in the outhouse.

The relationship of the participle καθαρίζων to the rest of verse 18 is unusual but not unheard of. New Testament grammarian Daniel Wallace identifies a certain participle as a “pendant nominative”<sup>5</sup> while others may call it a “hanging nominative.” In either case, the nominative is

---

<sup>2</sup> Most of the recent popular translations take the same approach, including the English Standard Version (ESV) and the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 2:13–14, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.”

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 2:16-17, “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” See also Romans 14.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 51-53.

syntactically independent of the rest of the sentence while nevertheless focusing on the main topic of that sentence. Grammatical purists who shudder at such a solution may prefer what is proposed by another respectable Greek grammar. Blass-Debrunner proposes that *καθαρίζων* here is a syntactical “incongruency” or solecism.<sup>6</sup> Where one might expect a participle modifying an entire clause to be neuter in gender, the writer has made it masculine.<sup>7</sup> The words *ἀρξάμενος* in Acts 10:37 and *ἀρξάμενοι* in Luke 24:47 function in a similar manner. Both of these masculine nominative participles positioned at the end of a passage explain the entire previous clause, just as *καθαρίζων* does here. Perhaps this “incongruency” is simply an example of St. Mark’s “unsophisticated” Greek.

Whatever you decide to call the participle *καθαρίζων* here, there need be no interruption to what Jesus is explaining. What a person eats does not defile his heart, he is saying. It doesn’t enter his heart at all. His food merely goes into his stomach, where the body has its own process for “cleansing all foods.” Indeed, Jesus urges, beware those who teach that the heart is corrupted by foods and other external things. Be on guard against all manmade regulations and the merely external displays of piety that may follow. They will distract you from the filth that has corrupted every heart since Adam’s fall. Thousands of years ago humanity’s Maker and Judge observed “that every inclination of the thoughts of (man’s) heart was only evil all the time” (Gen 6:5). That corruption cannot be removed by human efforts, including those that are well practiced in keeping with traditional rituals.

Jesus’ words at Mark 7 compel each of us to admit to a litany of sins. “Evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly” dirty every heart. Whether others notice them or not, God sees every one of them. So we may allow ourselves some self-imposed rituals before him. Yet at the same time we will always set aside our self-imposed piety and plead with David, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love... Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin... Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Ps 51). Then we will voice the Prayer of the Day for the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: “O Lord Jesus Christ, preserve the congregation of believers with your never-failing mercy. Help us avoid whatever is wicked and harmful, and guide us in the way that leads to our salvation.”

---

<sup>6</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), Paragraph 137, Subpoint 3.

<sup>7</sup> A number of Byzantine minuscules and lectionaries have the neuter *καθαρίζον* here, indicating that this understanding of the participle has a long history.