

SEQUOYAH HILLS  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“Food for the Road: Pea Soup”**

**Dr. Jay Howell**

**Mark 7:14-23**

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Today we continue our walk through part of the Gospel of Mark, some of these central discipleship chapters in the heart of Christ’s public ministry. What we’ll find is that, of all things, Jesus talks to his disciples about food. And so as we go through, we’ll be talking about the same thing, not because it’s so important to talk about food, but rather about how we are being fed, how we feed ourselves, spiritually certainly, but maybe literally too.

Last week when we started, we looked at an encounter between a group of Pharisees and scribes and Jesus, in which the Pharisees question why the disciples weren’t following a bit of dietary tradition, namely washing hands before eating for reasons of religious purity. Jesus called them out, not that washing hands before eating is such a bad thing or a bad idea, but because they were using it as a litmus test by which to judge others, which misses the whole point behind seeking purity and holiness before the Lord.

So with it, we talked about how healthy, faithful aspects of tradition, ritual, even just repetition in the journey of discipleship. Maybe one might consider it the regular diet of discipleship. It can be a very good thing. But turned into a litmus test, it can become truly negative and destructive.

Christ continues on that topic, now addressing the very notion of what goes in and what comes out. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, Mark 7:14-23.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Holy God, we praise you for by grace you call us to respond to your forgiveness with our own testimony. Not that we are so good or so mighty, but that you are, and because you are at work, others might see that evident within our lives in a new way. By your Word, we pray you sow a new work within us even now. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“Your mother’s in here with us,” the young girl Ragan said. The priest at her bedside, Father Karras, whose mother had passed away, calmly challenged whether that was true. He was there beside the girl’s bed because he had been summoned to address what was suspected to be an instance of demonic possession. “Your mother’s in here with us,” was something implied to mean that his mother’s spirit or soul was somehow trapped in hellish torment with the demons possessing the girl. (If you didn’t recognize it already, this is a scene from the movie *The Exorcist*.)

Father Karras replied, “If that’s true, you must know her maiden name.” He gets slightly closer to bed and asks, “What is it?” At this point, you might think, “Ha, got ‘em.” But then out of nowhere, the girl lurches forward

with an unnatural growl, spewing this chunky green vomit all over the priest. To say the least, the priest is stunned, and the movie-going public was terrified.

That scene became one of the indelible images of the movie, dubbed affectionately the “pea soup scene,” since the green substance spewed out on the priest appeared to many to be like pea soup.

The director William Friedkin later confessed that it wasn’t in fact pea soup proper, but rather porridge just with dull green food coloring in it. They apparently did that because it had a better texture for what they were looking for, which is kind of sickening in its own right. They rigged up a small plastic tube up, and on cue, someone off screen would pump this nasty substance through the tube and onto the actors on the set.

It’s been remembered and parodied ever since, with one send up years later featuring the priest getting ready for the exorcism by guzzling down lots of pea soup so that he himself could counter it by offering some of his own.

But the original significance, just of this bit of movie magic, still can be unsettling, as it was supposed to show that what was inside this person, you know, possessed by a demon, had become so corrupted that only this most vile substance could come out, in turn defiling anything it touched.

The notion of what comes out being what defiles is what Jesus brings up.

He turns to the crowd after dressing down the Pharisees and scribes, following their encounter regarding the disciples’ eating without washing their hands, not following religious dietary tradition. We talked about that last week. It’s not that faith tradition is a bad thing; it can be a good and faithful thing, and that particular tradition came about for what appears to be good reasons, but then it turned into a litmus test to gauge the piety of another person.

That’s what Jesus is calling out, and in a similar vein, he after addressing the Pharisees, he turns to the crowd and says, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

Now that’s a big statement, especially given what he and the Pharisees were just talking about. The text specifies that the practice the Pharisees and scribes were questioning was the lack of washing one’s hands, which was never something about Jewish Law, but rather of Jewish tradition. Not that the tradition didn’t have authority, but it wasn’t Torah. So maybe, if one were so inclined, you could have said, “Well, Jesus is just targeting these *extra*, added practices, tradition that has become an end unto itself.”

But then Jesus goes and says something like this, not just talking about tradition. When he brings up “nothing outside a person that by going in,” he’s talking about food. And a little later when he follows up just with the disciples, the text specifies that yes, that’s what was meant, that’s what was heard. “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” Jesus says. Then Mark adds this little editorial note: “Thus he declared all foods clean.”

That’s a huge claim, but when it comes to Jewish Law, Old Testament Law, there are some foods that are indeed declared unclean. Fast forward to the Book of Acts, when the church is starting to spread and Gentiles, not Jews, are starting to come to the faith and are receiving the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Peter is given the same conviction in a vision, but it wasn’t an easy conclusion for the church to reach. That was the biggest early

controversy in the first generation of the church: what place should all the Jewish Law rightfully have in this new Christian thing?

So what is Jesus doing here? Is he just saying, “Eat whatever you want”? And then by extension, is he saying, “Consume whatever you want”? Not just about food, about anything that you take in, not just things you taste, but things you see, things you hear, things you touch. None of it matters. Consume whatever you want. Nothing that goes in can defile.

I mean, this is great news. Most immediately it’s good news for everyone coming to the chili cook off this afternoon, because I understand there may be some creative ingredients in the mix of things. So if you come to eat, don’t worry. You won’t be defiled. (We should put that on the publicity for the event next year: “Fall Chili Cookoff: You won’t be defiled.” But hey, it’s good news. Jesus is giving us license to eat or, by extension, consume, take in, whatever we want, right?

Or maybe not so much. Jesus follows it by saying, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

And that statement follows in the same vein of much of Christ’s other teaching regarding things like rules and boundaries. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has a whole litany of topics that he brings up by saying, “You have heard it said...but I say to you,” and then putting in various things. You have heard it said, don’t murder, for example, but I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister shall be subject to judgment. Main point being, “It’s not about the rule and whether the rule is followed, whether the boundary or restriction is being observed. It’s about the heart beneath it; it’s about the faithful response, or lack thereof.”

Because this could be taken the wrong way too. It could be taken to mean, “Hey, just as long as you don’t break any of these other rules we come up with, you can eat, consume, take in, whatever you want.” And that’s where we’re gravely wrong, because we’d be fooling ourselves.

And it’s not just a “You are what you eat” sort of thing. This is where these seemingly arcane thoughts about dietary tradition and dietary law actually speak a lot into how one might follow Christ more fully as a disciple and seek the Lord more faithfully.

I mean, yes, by grace, in Christ, in his death and resurrection, we are liberated from having to live up to a set of rules in order to be blessed and accepted by God. Our worthiness before God is not determined by how much we follow this or that rule or fulfil this or that religious expectation. But if we think then that it means, “Hey, I can do anything I want, because Jesus has saved me,” we’ve misunderstood the assignment.

What Jesus is targeting is the idolizing of the object of a rule, of the specific action or the specific restriction, without examining heart. That’s what the latter part of what he said is talking about. “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come,” And then he offers a whole list of “evil intentions. “Fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” If we hear that and think of the list, “Well, I’m not fornicating, or I’m not stealing, or I’m not being deceitful,” so therefore I can take in what I want, we’re missing

the point. Or maybe we tell ourselves, “Hey, I’m a good person. I’m a good daughter or son. I’m a good student. I’m a good athlete. I’m a good parent, a good spouse. Therefore, I can consume whatever I want. I deserve this.”

If we do that, it’s actually kind of ironic. We take the liberation Jesus gives us from following a list of rules to measure ourselves by and then form another list of rules or rubrics that we can then justify ourselves by. And none of that is the point.

It’s about the heart, and you can tell the state of a heart, Jesus says, by what comes out of it. Is what comes out healthy, beneficial, edifying? Or is it pea soup? So the question we’re called to ask is, whatever it is you’re taking in, what impact is it having on your heart? And, are we fooling ourselves by creating our own list of criteria to justify what it is we consume?

Maybe we say, “Well, I donate this or that amount of money, so I can therefore be materialistic and selfish about everything else.” Or maybe we say, “Well, I get good grades in school, so I can therefore be lazy or mindless in my words and actions.” Or maybe we say, “Well, by my work I am providing a certain livelihood for my household, so I can therefore check out and disengage from my loved ones, disappear onto my phone or to the golf course or binge-watching reality shows.” Or maybe we say, “Well I don’t cheat on my spouse, so I can therefore watch whatever I want.” Or maybe we say, “Well, I’m fulfilling my responsibilities as a professional, as a spouse, as a parent, so I can therefore consume whatever I want at the end of the day, no matter how harmful it is.”

To all of those things, Christ is saying, “No. It’s not about the rule. It’s not about following them. It’s not about measuring up to a certain expectation. It’s about the heart. What does it all say about the heart? And if we think that things that we consume, that we take in, be it food or otherwise, don’t impact the heart and what comes out of it, we are fooling ourselves.

We might try to deflect the blame. Say, well it’s someone else’s fault, or it’s technology, or it’s because of all these unfair expectations and pressures, or it’s broader culture, but at the end of the day, we’re just avoiding the hard look that Christ is calling us to take: at ourselves.

Now that’s a word of conviction. And let me tell you, I’m preaching to myself hard today. But I hope we might hear a word of grace embedded within it too. If a corrupted heart is capable of such selfishness, of constantly seeking to self-justify, to deflect, to cast blame upon another, imagine what a heart infused by grace could do. Just imagine what a walk of discipleship could look like that instead of seeking to build up or secure oneself, it seeks to build up someone else, to love sacrificially, to speak with encouragement and love, to discipline one’s habits of mind and body, all of it not because we’re trying to live up to a certain pedigree, but because that’s what a life guided by grace, guided by God, guided by Christ, looks like.

What does that look like for you?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.