

Chapter Seven

Mark 7:1-13 Human Tradition and God's Commandment

And now Jesus was approached by the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem. They had noticed that his disciples ate their meals with "common" hands—meaning that they had not gone through a ceremonial washing. (The Pharisees, and indeed all the Jews, will never eat unless they have washed their hands in a particular way, following a traditional rule. And they will not eat anything bought in the market until they have first performed their "sprinkling". And there are many other things which they consider important, concerned with the washing of cups, jugs and basins.) So the Pharisees and the scribes put this question to Jesus, "Why do your disciples refuse to follow the ancient tradition, and eat their bread with 'common' hands?"

Jesus replied, "You hypocrites, Isaiah described you beautifully when he wrote - 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'. You are so busy holding on to the traditions of men that you let go the commandment of God!"

Then he went on, "It is wonderful to see how you can set aside the commandment of God to preserve your own tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother' and 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death'. But you say, 'if a man says to his father or his mother, Korban - meaning, I have given God whatever duty I owed to you', then he need not lift a finger any longer for his father or mother, so making the word of God invalid for the sake of the tradition which you hold. And this is typical of much of what you do."

It is generally a good idea to wash our dishes and to wash our hands before eating. Most of the rules that you and I impose upon ourselves have some relative validity. Some of us eat no meat because it is taking the life of another animal. Like all rules, that one might be useful. However, if we give that rule over-riding seriousness, discredit all meat eaters, and hold ourselves righteous in comparison with others, we are embodying the attitude of these Pharisees and religious scholars that Jesus is confronting in this story.

First of all, Jesus points out what these moral teachers neglect a wholehearted obedience to the total demand to live a life of integrity and compassion. Then Jesus points out the contradictions in their own position. If the issue had been principled vegetarianism, the Jesus in Mark's story might have said, "Do you have no compassion for the death of carrots? All life feeds on other life." In other words whatever moral principles we espouse, the limitations of these principles show up at some point or another. The rules are always just humanly created rules that may help in most situations, but not all. All rules are nothing more than approximations of the Command to Love fully.

The deep issue here is not the contradictions in our moral behaviors, but our neglect of God's commandment. What does that mean? It does not mean a better set of rules, even though it remains true that some rules are better than others. While the commandment of God may be expressed in rules, the commandment of God is not rules. Rules, all rules, are human tradition. New Testament passages like this one are entirely misunderstood when they are interpreted to mean that your rules or my rules are better than the rules of these Pharisees and religious scholars. Rules are rules, and

while rules can be evaluated from the perspective of the Commandment to love the Infinitely Real and every finite neighbor, rules are not now and never can be the final rules.

Neither Jesus nor Mark focused on initiating a new set of rules. Rather, their breakthrough was a fresh context for thinking about all rules. Their breakthrough had to do with seeing a deeper sort of obedience--obedience to a *Total Demand* which was infinitely more than obeying the rules, however good those rules may be. When we make judgments about which human rules are best to use in a specific situation, we need a context that is larger than the rules. This is the truth Mark is implying: our master context is obedience to the *Command* of the Final, Infinite, Overall Reality. So what is this *Great Command*? Stated in both Old and New Testaments, this *Great Command* is about living our whole lives in a realistic manner—in full affirmation of the Whole Reality that is our Source and Sustenance as well as the Whole Reality that is coming at us as future. The future include all our real neighbors and their real lives—estranged lives, potential lives, and perhaps repentant lives. “Loving God and neighbor” is the short expression for this inexhaustible *Great Command for our future*.

Morality is a social creation; it is nothing more divine than brushing our teeth and all the other disciplines, habits, rules, taboos, customs and guidelines that each culture creates to give some order to our living together with other people. Such social creations are important and necessary, but not divine, not ultimate, and definitely not a container in which we must contain the Spirit that Jesus and Mark are revealing to us. Spirit gives us context for our creations of morality and our creative application of those rules, but morality, like all other human creations, is subject to revolution from the context of the Spirit depth that is the core of Mark’s gospel.

When have you discovered that social norms could not be a container for your authenticity?

Mark 7:14-23 What Defiles a Human Being?

Then he called the crowd close to him again, and spoke to them, "Listen to me now, all of you, and understand this, There is nothing outside a man which can enter into him and make him 'common'. It is the things which come out of a man that make him 'common'!"

Later, when he had gone indoors away from the crowd, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Oh, are you as dull as they are?" he said. "Can't you see that anything that goes into a man from outside cannot make him 'common' or unclean? You see, it doesn't go into his heart, but into his stomach, and passes out of the body altogether, so that all food is clean enough. But," he went on, "whatever comes out of a man, that is what makes a man 'common' or unclean. For it is from inside, from men's hearts and minds, that evil thoughts arise—lust, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, arrogance and folly! All these evil things come from inside a man and make him unclean!"

Mark may have included here an original teaching of Jesus, but Mark apparently thinks his audience are not understanding this teaching very well, for he has Jesus explain it further to these “still confused” disciples. Mark is indicating that it is harmless to our Spirit lives to eat unwashed food, unkosher food, Gentile food. But more importantly,

Mark is indicating that the real origins of our Spirit defilement are located in the basic attitudes of our inner lives out of which flow all that we say and do. Mark is conducting a thoroughgoing rejection of the interior attitude we often call "moralism" and in so doing he raises this fundamental question: "What is the proper basic attitude of our inner lives?"

Clearly, Mark has more to say about this basic attitude, or faith, or ultimate obedience. And we can notice that Mark is indicating a detachment from both Jewish culture and Greek culture, a detachment rooted in something divine, absolute, universal to all cultures.

How have you sought for a obedience that transcends your cultural upbringing?

Mark 7:24-30 Healing a Greek Daughter

Then he got up and left that place and went off to the neighborhood of Tyre. There he went into a house and wanted no one to know where he was. But it proved impossible to remain hidden. For no sooner had he got there, than a woman who had heard about him, and who had a daughter possessed by an evil spirit, arrived and prostrated herself before him. She was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth, and she asked him to drive the evil spirit out of her daughter. Jesus said to her, "You must let the children have all they want first. It is not right, you know, to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

But she replied, "Yes, Lord, I know, but even the dogs under the table eat what the children leave."

"If you can answer like that," Jesus said to her, "you can go home! The evil spirit has left your daughter." And she went back home and found the child lying quietly on her bed, and the evil spirit gone.

We find in this healing story, another Mark-constructed parable with many hidden and not so hidden meanings. A Greek woman asks for deliverance for her daughter. Jesus gives this very curious reply, "Let the children be fed first, since it isn't good to take bread out of the children's mouths and throw it to the dogs." "Children" clearly refers to the children of Israel. "Dogs" refers to the Gentile world. Also Mark is continuing with the metaphor of feeding. Historically, it was indeed true that the actual life and death of Jesus had only fed the children of Israel. Jesus did not conduct a mission to the Greek world. The issue of Christian food for the inhabitants of Greek or Hellenistic culture came into prominence after Jesus' death. The entire idea of feeding death/resurrection to Gentile children as well as the children of Israel was a controversial issue for the entire first century of Jesus' followers.

Mark is upending the rules and tradition of his own Hebrew heritage at a central point, at a point where the historical Jesus had given no clear guidance. Mark does not deny that Jesus constructed his mission to "the lost children of Israel." Mark, by telling this story, underlines that the mission of Jesus yielded extra food that is being eaten by Gentiles.

Mark is not implying that we should call other cultural groups "dogs." Rather, he is attacking Jewish in-groupism. He has the Greek woman humble herself in faith and

boldly counter Jesus' challenge with this spunky retort, "Sir, even the dogs under the children's table get the scraps (dropped by) the children." This saying has many humorous overtones for Mark. Religiously trained Hebrews are indeed dropping the food being offered to them by Jesus. And untutored Greek people are turning up with an eagerness to snap it up. This Greek woman expresses faith, her trust in the healing power of the Jesus-message and movement. This woman has thereby bested those children of Israel who, though blessed by the long heritage of this "People of God" community, are showing up with little or no hunger for the food that heals and nurtures the human Spirit.

The Spirit of the Jesus-breakthrough is clearly able to abandon not only the old rules of classical Judaism but also the newer rules of Palestinian Christianity. Mark's Christianity continues Paul's critique of Christianity's first formations. The ongoing "self-criticism of Christianity" is an important topic. Most monastic movements have engaged in such self-criticism. The Protestant Reformation can be viewed as the establishment of religious self-criticism as a permanent factor in being Christian.

Just as finite everyday life of Jesus had to die to reveal the resurrection, so all Christian formations must die (self criticize) to be the witnesses to the resurrection. If we were to proclaim the message Mark's gospel clearly and relevantly, we might find more unchurched people than churchgoers open to this message.

Where in your current religious history have you noticed something similar to this struggle Mark was having with Jewish Christians rejecting Gentile Christians?

Mark 7: 31-37 The Deaf Mute--The Ninth Healing of an Israelite

Once more Jesus left the neighborhood of Tyre and passed through Sidon towards the Lake of Galilee, and crossed the Ten Towns territory. They brought to him a man who was deaf and unable to speak intelligibly, and they implored him to put his hand upon him. Jesus took him away from the crowd by himself. He put his fingers in the man's ears and touched his tongue with his own saliva. Then, looking up to Heaven, he gave a deep sigh and said to him in Aramaic, "Open!"

And his ears were opened and immediately whatever had tied his tongue came loose and he spoke quite plainly. Jesus gave instructions that they should tell no one about this happening, but the more he told them, the more they broadcast the news. People were absolutely amazed, and kept saying, "How wonderful he has done everything! He even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak."

This is yet another Mark-constructed parable. From Mark's perspective, Mark's own heritage of people is deaf and dumb in Spirit awareness. Israel does not hear the Spirit message and does not speak the truth of Spirit. "Israel" in this context does not mean Jewish biology or the practitioners of a Jewish religion. "Israel" means Mark's own religious upbringing, religious symbols, religious practices, and religious communal life. Mark is speaking first and foremost to the deaf and dumb Christ-way practitioners of his Hellenistic/Hebraic religious training.

For all of us today, whatever our religious practice or lack of one, Mark is alluding to a type of hearing and speaking that is rooted in an authenticity to which our religious practices might lead us, but which is a state of life that is infinitely deeper than our religious practices themselves. Religious practices are like parables; they hold a secret that we must discover in the depths of our own being.

In Mark's story, it is not just Israel, but humanity that is learning to hear the Infinite Silence speak and to speak of what is heard. That is why those standing around were amazed and dumbfounded: "the deaf hear and the mute speak." People standing around today will be no less amazed if such a thing happened to the Christian-identified people of our era, or to people anywhere in any cultural place and practice.

What sort of Spirit deafness and muteness characterizes Christian-identified people you know?

Chapter Eight

Mark 8:1-9 Feeding the 4000

About this time it happened again that a large crowd collected and had nothing to eat. Jesus called the disciples over to him and said, "My heart goes out to this crowd; they have been with me three days now and they have no food left. If I send them off home without anything, they will collapse on the way—and some of them have come from a distance."

His disciples replied, "Where could anyone find the food to feed them here in this deserted spot?" "How many loaves have you got?" Jesus asked them. "Seven," they replied.

So Jesus told the crowd to settle themselves on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves into his hands, and with a prayer of thanksgiving broke them, and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people; and this they did. They had a few small fish as well, and after blessing them, Jesus told the disciples to give these also to the people. They ate and they were satisfied. Moreover, they picked up seven baskets full of pieces left over. The people numbered about four thousand.

Now why does Mark include another mass feeding event in his story? And why all this interest in numbers? They have **seven** loaves and a few fish. They feed **4000** people. They have **seven** big baskets of leftover scraps.

Mark intends these leftover scraps to remind us of the story of the Gentile woman who, like the dogs, was ready to eat the scraps under the children's table. The number seven may allude to the then known kingdoms of the Gentile world. Mark's numbers are not documentary reporting nor casually chosen: they mean something in Mark's parable-like story telling.

In the first feeding story we had **twelve** baskets of leftovers, one for each of the tribes of Israel. In the first healing we we told of **5000** being fed with **five** loaves and **two** fish. Mark is clearly trying to provoke us to probe these numbers for his secret meanings. Mark is suggesting we need to open our ears in some way in order to "get it."

I don't know how to track down all Mark's numerical meanings, but Mark is clearly interested in feeding Gentiles as well as Hebrews. Perhaps there is a parallel for our times, if we think of the Hebrews as the Christian establishment and the Gentiles as the secular world. Also, Mark is implying that it takes only a few bits of food to feed great masses of people.

How do you see a few awake Spirit persons bringing food, indeed being food, for both for the religious establishment and the secular world?

Mark 8:10-13 No Sign will be Given.

Jesus sent them home, and then he boarded the boat at once with his disciples and went on to the district of Dalmanutha. Now the Pharisees came out and began an argument with him, wanting a sign from Heaven. Jesus gave a deep sigh, and then said, "What makes this generation want a sign? I can tell you this, they will certainly not be given one!"

Then he left them and got aboard the boat again, and crossed the lake

What is a sign? The Pharisees are asking for some sort of objective public proof that Jesus is indeed some kind of authoritative person sent by Infinite Authority. They want the sky to light up and shout to them that they must pay attention to this unauthorized person.

In the passage, Jesus says that no sign will be given this generation. This saying is consistent with Mark's continuing emphasis upon secrecy. The authority of Jesus is a secret seen only by those who have eyes that see--heard only by those who have ears that hear.

Members of the currently popular forms of Christian understanding often talk about objective, public proof that Jesus is the One. They interpret the healing stories as miracles that prove something. They interpret the resurrection of Jesus as a miracle that proves something. They interpret the Bible itself as some kind of miracle that proves something. But Mark has Jesus say (and perhaps the historical Jesus did say) that there will be no sign, no proof, no miracles in that sense. Mark is clear that the significance of Jesus is a secret that you have to be a Spirit person to know.

We don't have signs, we just have parables, but we have to be Spirit persons to understand these parables. Mark surely believed that the ministry of Jesus was filled with illuminating teachings, transformative callings, amazing healings, and wondrous happenings among those who follow Jesus, but we have to be Spirit persons to see these wonders. The meaning of Jesus is not obvious to our objective, controlling, news-reporter eyes. In the life of Jesus nothing happened that can force you or me to accept Jesus as a cosmically significant happening.

The significance of Jesus is a secret to everyone except those who are experiencing a profound inward change. To them, all is understood, callings are heard, lives are healed, and wondrous powers for human living are set loose.

How have you required of Jesus or of the Bible some outward sign that it is true?

How have you discovered the truth of the biblical witness in your own life?

Mark 8: 14-21 The Mystery of the Bread

The disciples had forgotten to take any food and had only one loaf with them in the boat. Jesus spoke seriously to them, "Keep your eyes open! Be on your guard against the 'yeast' of the Pharisees and the 'yeast' of Herod!" And this sent them into an earnest consultation among themselves because they had brought no bread. Jesus knew it and said to them, "Why all this discussion about bringing no bread? Don't you understand or grasp what I say even yet? Are you like the people who 'having eyes, do not see, and having ears, do not hear'? Have you forgotten - when I broke five loaves for five thousand people, how many baskets full of pieces did you pick up?" "Twelve," they replied. "And then there were seven loaves for four thousand people, how many baskets of pieces did you pick up?" "Seven," they said. "And does that still mean nothing to you?" he said

The disciples are out in the boat with Jesus. They have no bread except one loaf. Is Jesus that one loaf? Mark is surely talking about Spirit bread in another parable about physical bread. Jesus mentions the inadvisability of eating the yeast that the religious and secular authorities are offering. But the disciples are having difficulty getting their minds off physical bread and onto the Spirit level of this discussion.

Mark has Jesus call to the attention of these dumb-dumb disciples (and to us dumb-dumb readers) the two previously told stories about feeding the multitudes:

five loaves for **five thousand** with **twelve** baskets full of scraps left over, and

seven loaves for **four thousand** with **seven big** baskets full of scraps left over.

"You still don't understand do you?" says Jesus to his disciples.

"Well, do you understand?" says Mark to us.

Perhaps we have a few hints:

The first feeding satisfied a big crowd with minimal resources and there was food left over for the whole twelve tribes of Israel.

The second feeding satisfied a slightly smaller big crowd with slightly more resources and there was food left over for the whole seven kingdoms of the Gentile world.

Five fed the whole of Israel and seven fed the rest of the world. Five plus seven make twelve. There were twelve disciples.

Mark is asking us to think like this. But there is an even deeper thinking that we must do. How do the bodies (the lives) of so few become bread for so many?

And what must happen for Jesus' body or my body or your body to become bread for multitudes of people, indeed for all of human kind?

What does it mean to you for Jesus' body or your body to be bread for others?

Mark 8:22-26 A Blind Man Sees: The Tenth Healing of an Israelite

So they arrived at Bethsaida where a blind man was brought to him, with the earnest request that he should touch him. Jesus took the blind man's hand and led him outside the village. Then he moistened his eyes with saliva and putting his hands on him, asked, "Can you see at all?"

The man looked up and said, "I can see people. They look like trees—only they are walking about." Then Jesus put his hands on his eyes once more and his sight came into focus. And he recovered and saw everything sharp and clear. And Jesus sent him off to his own house with the words, "Don't even go into the village."

In this story, it takes Jesus two tries to get this person to see clearly. Let us note that the disciples as well are not seeing clearly after their first encounters with Jesus. Also, it is interesting to note that this healing took place outside the village of Bethsaida, a town on the shore of the sea of Galilee. Simon and Andrew and James and John had all been called from their nets fishing on that sea. They had left their fishing nets and followed Jesus to become a new kind of fishers. Mark, in telling this blind man story at this point, is very likely alluding to one of these disciples. And indeed Simon Peter is revealed to be a blind man in the very next story.

The secrecy theme is also repeated in this story. The ex-blind man is ordered not to parade himself in the village. Mark is saying once again that the purpose of Jesus was not to become a popular miracle worker, but something deeper. And this something deeper is still a secret. We are given the hint that the blind disciples (and we blind readers) sort of see, but it is going to take Jesus a second try to bring fully clear vision. And it is going to take Mark a few more stories to deal with our blindness.

When have you experienced yourself sort of seeing, but still needing more clarity?

Mark 8:27-33 Peter Sees, but Does Not See Fully

Jesus then went away with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who are men saying that I am?"

"John the Baptist," they answered. "But others say that you are Elijah or, some say, one of the prophets." Then he asked them, "But what about you—who do you say that I am?" "You are Christ!" answered Peter. Then Jesus impressed it upon them that they must not mention this to anyone.

And he began to teach them that it was inevitable that the Son of Man should go through much suffering and be utterly repudiated by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days

rise again. He told them all this quite bluntly. This made Peter draw him on one side and take him to task about what he had said. But Jesus turned and faced his disciples and rebuked Peter. "Out of my way, Satan!" he said. "Peter, you are not looking at things from God's point of view, but from man's!"

This story is like a watershed in Mark's whole story. Jesus himself now puts the question to his disciples, "How are people interpreting me?" And they answer with terms of great significance: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. But each of these designations interprets Jesus as a preparer of the way for the final revelation that is yet to come some day.

Then Jesus asks the disciples, "How do you interpret me?" And Peter blurts out, "You are the Anointed One." That is, Peter is saying that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the last word on what it means to be human. Peter is saying, "You are it; we don't need to wait for another."

Jesus does not deny that Peter is correct, but he also knows that Peter does not know what he is talking about. And so Mark has Jesus say at this point, "Don't tell anyone about this interpretation." It is a secret. And it is going to take some additional Spirit maturity to *see* what this secret is all about.

So Jesus proceeds to teach them that the true messianic figure (the son of Adam) is destined to suffer, be rejected, and be killed. Jesus also mentions rising after spending three days in the tomb, but Peter only hears that Jesus is to be killed and he questions Jesus about saying such a thing. Clearly this does not jibe with Peter's view of what is supposed to happen to the Messiah (or to those of us following the Messiah).

Jesus responds to Peter's *blindness* in a most definite way. This perspective Peter is holding is evil, is Satan, is the greatest of all temptations. The Truth of God is the exact opposite of the view that Peter is holding.

The Anointed One is not privileged with divine intervention on behalf of his safety, but precisely the opposite. The Anointed One is vulnerable to the power held by the evil forces. The Anointed One will have to take the worst that these forces can do. Such tragic suffering is the first point of a true perspective on the essence of the Messiah—the destiny of the one who is to be the advent of all goodness and the defeat of all evil in human affairs. The second point is that the very worst that evil can do will not defeat Jesus, but this second point cannot be grasped until the first point is fully taken in.

None of this makes sense to Peter, nor to the rest of the disciples. And it will not make sense to us until we have been moved in our Spirit journey to a place from which it does indeed make sense of our own life experience. At this point in Mark's story, the Messiahship of Jesus is still a secret. And don't be too sure that you know the secret until you have heard the rest of Mark's story.

When we have read and understood the rest of Mark's Gospel in our own lives, we will have been asked to ponder these enigmas: the advent of the Final Truth about human living includes understanding that the finite must be sacrificed to the Infinite, the temporal offered up to the Eternal. In other words, the conditional loyalties of living are relativized in relation to an Unconditional Loyalty to the Absolute. Mark is going to poetize this deep truth about the journey of Spirit with his imaginative story of a totally realistic exemplar called "Jesus."

How is all this challenging to your thinking about what it means for Jesus to be the Christ?

Mark 8:34-37 Walking in the Footsteps of the Messiah

Then he called his disciples and the people around him, and said to them, "If anyone wants to follow in my footsteps, he must give up all right to himself, take up his cross and follow me. The man who tries to save his life will lose it; it is the man who loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's who will save it. What good can it do a man to gain the whole world at the price of his own soul? What can a man offer to buy back his soul once he has lost it?"

In case we have misunderstood and think that this business of suffering, rejection, and dying applies only to Jesus and not to those who follow Jesus, Mark now talks about the "cross" of the followers. What is good enough for the master is good enough for the follower. In fact, following this master means abandoning everything for the sake of the Spirit life that is promised along this path.

When we think of taking up our "cross," we may think of something romantic like being thrown in jail or having our house bombed or being shot in the head. But we need to consider as well the more pedestrian types of crosses. Let's begin with paying the price of getting up an hour earlier every day in order to make time for a Spirit practice. Let's move on from there to giving up Wednesday night television in order to attend a regular study group or social action group or an experiment in Christian community. Actually, what really has to be given up is the self-centered self that values its own indulgences, addictions, and familiar habits more than paying the cost of becoming a "great Spirit being" capable of making a significant contribution to the times in which we live. And to the extent that our contributions are profoundly significant, at least some people will want to shun us, ignore us, or even punish us for making these contributions. In these ways, the "cross" in an ordinary part of the everyday life of the followers of Jesus, indeed of the followers of any authentic exemplar.

So with these everyday "crosses" in our minds, let us translate the Jesus sayings in this passage as follows: "Those who try to save the life of their current customary ego are going to lose out entirely, but those who lose the life they normally crave for the sake of the good news (the offered path of an ever-opening Infinite relatedness), are going to save everything worth having. Indeed, what good does it do a person to acquire 793

billion dollars, but lose his or her essential being? Just how much would that person be willing to pay to get his or her true life back?"

How much is having an authentic Spirit life worth to you?

What is difficult for you to sacrifice in order to have and keep a Spirit Life alive?

Mark 8:38 Are We Ashamed of This Messiah?

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in the Father's glory with the holy angels around him."

We are inclined to ignore passages like this one entirely. Many use such passages to dismiss the entire Bible as gobbledygook. So what is Mark talking about that might make sense in our own lives? What does he think that the Jesus character that he is painting is talking about? Why would we be ashamed of Jesus and his message? And why would Jesus be ashamed of those who don't accept and live his message

Let's start with this question "Is our generation also adulterous and sinful? If Jesus is our portrait of true humanity as a sacrifice of all temporal loyalties to an overriding loyalty to the Eternal, then indeed our generation, like Jesus' generation, is an adulterous and sinful (that is, an estranged from Reality) generation.

What does "the son of man" mean? That phrase can be translated "the son of Adam." meaning the offspring of a true humanity that replaces the old estranged humanity. The "son of Adam" is also a phrase that means "the Messiah" or "the Christ." The historical Jesus might have used the phrase "son of Adam" without meaning that he himself was the Christ. And he might have identified with this true humanity without making his message about his own true humanity. Mark, however, was clear in his mind that Jesus was the Christ, this true humanity. Mark was working to clarify what that means.

Both Jesus of Nazareth and Mark were surely familiar with this myth that the "son of Adam" was to appear in the final wrap-up of time to judge the living and the dead. In other words, the humanity would win in the end over estranged humanity. This was simply part of their trust that Reality always wins in the end over the unreality. The phrase "come in the Father's glory accompanied by holy angels" is nothing more than further poetic elaboration of that trust in Reality over unreality.

So Mark is saying to us that if we are ashamed of Jesus and his words we are on "the wrong side of history" to use a more modern phrase. History, that is the Final Reality unfolding in history, will shame us if we do not see in this Jesus, the Christ revelation about the essence of true humanity. Being this true humanity means rejecting the false

humanity—repenting of the falseness in our own lives and opening ourselves to the Truth that has and is creating us, rather than some truth we ourselves have created.

Chapter Nine

Mark 9:1 Victory in Your Lifetime and Mine

Then he added, "Believe me, there are some of you standing here who will know nothing of death until you have seen the kingdom of God coming in its power!"

In this passage, Mark makes very clear that the true life of humanity does not wait until the end of time to appear. It is appearing now in Jesus, in his words, and in our acceptance of him and his words that release in us our own true humanity. God's Imperial Rule or the Kingdom of God is already coming in power in the lifetime of the disciples. The world did not end; the stars did not fall; the Roman empire was not overthrown; the corrupt religious establishment was not yet purged; the widespread manifestation of rebellion against God was not put down. So what did it mean to Mark to say that God's Imperial Rule was already appearing and would be coming in power in the lifetimes of those standing with him? It means that this "new Adam" or "restored humanity" is walking and talking and living on earth now in Jesus and in his disciples, and might also abound in you and me.

Yet for now, God's Imperial Rule is a secret, a secret known only to those to whom this secret is being revealed? The overall parable-style of Mark's gospel prepares us to guess that for Mark this august coming of a new Adam means for now an inward transformation in the lives of relatively few people. So these images about the end of the world do not refer to an outward affair that a TV camera or a tape recorder could capture. Yet the estranged world did indeed come to an end in the lifetime of these disciples, but this cosmic sort of ending was not a public event that everyone could see. Only those with unusual eyes could see (figuratively speaking) the stars falling from the sky and notice that all rebellion against Reality, Truth, and Justice was indeed being overcome in the living here and now.

When have you seen in the secrecy of your interior Spirit eyes, the end of the world?

Mark 9:2-10 Jesus is Transfigured in the Vision of Three Disciples.

Six days later, Jesus took Peter and James and John with him and led them high up on a hill-side where they were entirely alone. His whole appearance changed before their eyes, while his clothes became white, dazzling white - whiter than any earthly bleaching could make them. Elijah and Moses appeared to the disciples and stood there in conversation with Jesus. Peter burst out to Jesus, "Master, it is wonderful for us to be here! Shall we put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah?"

He really did not know what to say, for they were very frightened. Then came a cloud which overshadowed them and a voice spoke out of the cloud, "This is my dearly-loved Son. Listen to him!"

Then, quite suddenly they looked all round them and saw nobody at all with them but Jesus. And as they came down the hill-side, he warned them not to tell anybody what they had seen till "the Son of Man should have risen again from the dead". They treasured this remark and tried to puzzle out among themselves what "Rising from the dead" could mean.

This is one of the most intriguing stories in the Bible. It is dense with metaphors and allusions. It is clearly a fictitious story expressing an inward happening. If we think of this story as an objective record about a literal event, we miss its meaning altogether. It is about an inward happening that can still be reduplicated in our lives today.

Let's take notice of some curious things about this story. Jesus takes with him the most inner circle of the new Israel. He goes to the top of a mountain, like Moses. There Jesus is transformed in the eyes of these disciples. His dirty old peasant attire becomes brilliantly white. And two figures appear with him: (1) Elijah, the great-grandfather of all prophets and (2) Moses, the key founder of this entire religious tradition, the author, so it was supposed, of the five books of the Torah (the stories of the origin of all things, and the origin of Israel rooted in the Exodus revelation, constitution, and law books for that called people). These two figures and Jesus are conversing. This is a huge summit meeting.

The disciples are simply terrified. They do not know what to say or do. Peter suggests putting up three monuments of some sort. Jesus does not accept this panicky suggestion. Instead, a cloud moves in and casts a shadow over them. This heavenly cloud speaks, "This is my favored son, listen to him!"

The next verse is an extremely important part of this tale. *"Suddenly, as they looked around then as say nobody with them but Jesus."*

Jesus was just there in ordinary peasant garb that was no longer glowing white. Elijah and Moses have vanished. It is just an ordinary mountain with four ordinary persons hanging out together. The exciting part of this story is describing an interior happening in the life of someone, someone who first told this wonderful story. If Mark did not create this story himself, he probably elaborated on a story that someone earlier had created. Mark was not a literalist like our conservative post-scientific idolaters of Mark's writings. Mark surely knew that this story was a story.

So what does this wonderful story say? It says that Jesus is just an ordinary human being like any one of us. It also says that this ordinary human being was gleaming with the shine-through of the Infinite Unconditional Eternity, of the Power of all powers, of the Truth of truths, of the Awe of the Awesome.

This shine of Jesus is so shiny that two other shiny exemplars from the deep past are gathered up into the shining Awe. No wonder the disciples are terrified. They are looking straight into the "face" of the Infinite—they are seeing the beginning and end of all realities. They are hearing the Infinite speak in their own language that they should

listen to this ordinary human being, Jesus, for an Infinite shine through of Truth with a capital "T."

And as they were walking down the mountain he (Jesus) "warned them not to tell anybody what they had seen till the Son of Man should have risen again from the dead". They treasured this remark and tried to puzzle out among themselves what 'Rising from the dead' could mean"

We puzzle about resurrection ourselves, do we not? What does this rising from the dead mean? At this point in Mark's story resurrection is still a secret. But Mark the parable writer, is giving us a big hint. This story about the transfiguration of Jesus is telling us something about resurrection. Resurrection means seeing Jesus in a new light—indeed in a divine shine.

Part of what is going on with this story is that the disciples never told this story before the resurrection, because the story was not written until after the resurrection. And the story was written to interpret what the resurrection means. The story tells us that the resurrection means a transfiguration in our view of Jesus. The story hints that the resurrection is a secret known only to those to whom this transfiguration of Jesus has happened. The resurrection has to do with seeing that Jesus is indeed a place in the history of time where the Infinite shines through, and in so doing joins together all the places of shining through into one overwhelming shine-through.

When have you experienced an ordinary person shining with an extraordinary presence?

Mark 9:11-13 Elijah, the Son of Adam, and Suffering

Then they asked him this question, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come before Christ?" It is quite true," he told them, "that Elijah does come first, and begins the restitution of all things. But what does the scripture say about the Son of Man? This: that he must go through much suffering and be treated with contempt! I tell you that not only has Elijah come already, but they have done to him exactly what they wanted—just as the scripture says of him."

In this passage Mark deals with a bit of theological confusion that he wants to clear up. He adds this bit of dialogue to the story about the transfiguration of Jesus.

The disciples start questioning Jesus, "Why do the scholars claim that Elijah must come before Christ?" The question behind this question is: how could Jesus be the Anointed One, since Elijah has not come yet to set all things right? Another question hangs in the background: Why would the Anointed One have to suffer after all things had been set right? In other words, how could Jesus, the crucified one, be the Anointed One pointed to in the Messiah heritage?

Mark interprets the Messiah heritage in this way: "Elijah has already come." This is an allusion to John, the Baptizer. Furthermore, the expectations contained in the scriptures

were fulfilled. Here is the fulfillment: the corrupt authorities scorned and did away with both Elijah and the son of Adam. In other words, don't expect a time to come when evil will no longer persecute good. This is what the coming of the fully good looks like: it is persecuted by the evil, exposing the evil to be genuinely evil. And this is what evil looks like: rejecting the coming of the long expected fulfillment.

What do we commonly think about the coming of the fully good? Do we see the end of evil on the planet? Do we see the so-called good humanity whist off to some other place? If we see ourselves among the evil ones, engaged in being forgiven, and being offered repentance and a new life, then we must also welcome that fact that Jesus and Jesus' disciples will model God's forgiveness for us by facing the rage of estranged humanity. Mark is providing us a realism that we may not want to accept.

Indeed, if the gospel of Mark is truly interpreted today, will it be accepted by most of the world, or even by the pope, the bishops, the scholars, most of the clergy and the laity of the existing forms of Christianity? Indeed, can you or I truly see this crucified peasant teacher, of no Greek or Latin sophistication, as the true humanity we have been waiting for?

What do typical Christians today want the coming of the Messiah to mean?

What do you want the coming of the Messiah to mean?

Mark 9:14-29 The Eleventh Healing of a Hebrew Person—a Speechless Boy

Then as they rejoined the other disciples, they saw that they were surrounded by a large crowd, and that some of the scribes were arguing with them. As soon as the people saw Jesus, they ran forward excitedly to welcome him.

"What is the trouble?" Jesus asked them.

A man from the crowd answered, "Master, I brought my son to you because he has a dumb spirit. Wherever he is, it gets hold of him, throws him down on the ground and there he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth. It's simply wearing him out. I did speak to your disciples to get them to drive it out, but they hadn't the power to do it."

Jesus answered them, "Oh, what a faithless people you are! How long must I be with you, how long must I put up with you? Bring him here to me."

So they brought the boy to him, and as soon as the spirit saw Jesus, it convulsed the boy, who fell to the ground and writhed there, foaming at the mouth.

"How long has he been like this?" Jesus asked the father.

"Ever since he was a child," he replied. "Again and again it has thrown him into the fire or into water to finish him off. But if you can do anything, please take pity on us and help us."

"If you can do anything!" retorted Jesus. "Everything is possible to the man who believes."

"I do believe," the boy's father burst out. "Help me to believe more!"

When Jesus noticed that a crowd was rapidly gathering, he spoke sharply to the evil spirit, with the words, "I command you, deaf and dumb spirit, come out of this boy, and never go into him again!"

The spirit gave a loud scream and after a dreadful convulsion left him. The boy lay there like a corpse, so that most of the bystanders said, "He is dead."

But Jesus grasped his hands and lifted him up, and then he stood on his own feet. When he had gone home, Jesus' disciples asked him privately, "Why were we unable to drive it out?"

"Nothing can drive out this kind of thing except prayer," replied Jesus.

This long story has many new elements. An argument is going on about a boy being speechless and very much out of control. No message is getting through. No life is being healed. Perhaps we have all been in such arguments.

The disciples are not able to cast out this demon. Jesus tells them it is because of their lack of prayer. Apparently this is a real tough sort of demon. It not only makes the boy speechless, it throws him on the ground and into convulsions. He foams at the mouth, grinds teeth, and goes rigid. It seems to me I have met people like this. When Jesus commands the demon to leave for good, it screeches, comes out of the boy, and leaves him looking like a corpse. Everyone thinks he is dead. But Jesus takes his hand and *raises* him to his feet (notice the allusion to resurrection).

Mark is apparently trying to communicate to whoever he hopes will read this story that no demon, however intimidating, is too tough to cast out. Why can't the disciples do it? They lack prayer. Mark does not say what prayer is, but he implies that Jesus has done plenty of prayer, enough to handle this demon.

If we understand "prayer" as an exercise of practicing our essential freedom, and that a consistent, diligent practice of prayer (freedom) builds up our power of intentionality for our daily living, then we can see a relationship between our prayers and our power to provoke others toward a healing of their inner lives. Your time alone in solitary prayer can build up the energy of freedom that spills over into the living of your life. With these hints about the meaning of prayer, we can begin to grasp why prayer may be needed in our own lives, if we are going to cast out tough demons.

And we must not forget that our role in casting out demons means provoking the freedom that exists in the person being healed to share in this casting out that person's demons. Jesus, the man of prayer, knows that healing does not depend on him alone. It requires trust among those being healed. Jesus asks the father whose son is sick, if he has faith (trust in the healing potential of life itself). The man expresses a willingness to have even more faith than he now has. Faith (trust) as well as prayer (freedom) are necessary factors for casting out tough demons.

Again, what are demons? How are we to understand “demons” with our 21st century metaphors? We know that there is no literal spook-world hovering about us and invading us with filmy evil gremlins. We can understand, however, how we might meet in ourselves and others some very debilitating, estranged relationships with Reality. Such “demons” are real enough in our experience. We experience “demons” as much as and perhaps even more than any other generation. The generation of Jesus and Mark used a different language to point to these demons. We cannot use their language without a disjuncture with everything else we know. But this does not excuse us from hearing what they were talking about with their language, and translating their experience of demons into our language about these same forces.

Furthermore, this speechless and deranged boy in the above story is symbolic of Israel of a whole. He is a child of Israel, the eleventh Israelite to be healed in Mark’s narrative. Israel, Mark is telling us, is in a sad state of disrelationship. Israel is speechless, with limited faith, limited prayer, limited willingness to trust in the Power of Reality to deliver it from all its disrelationships with Reality. Even after the vast energies of the demon left, those standing around (Israel) were still giving up on the now dead the boy (Israel). But Jesus does not give the boy up for dead. This death leads to life, to resurrection. Jesus models another truth about this deep nature of human life: being released from our wild, demonic rides do not leave us merely dead. We can then get up, and walk our real lives.

So, when you and I who claim to be disciples of Jesus are about the work of assisting others to overcome their demons, we have our model. We come prepared as persons of deep prayer. We know that our freedom and the freedom of others can overcome any demon. Then when demons leave and we see these previously demon-driven people left demon-less, lying flat-out-like-dead on the ground, our work is not done. We also then take them by the hand and *raise* them to their feet. We don’t end our witness with the death of the demons, we complete this healing process with a resurrection to an authentic walking of the healed life.

When have you confronted Spirit sicknesses that seemed too tough for you to deal with?

What does not giving up on the world’s Spirit sicknesses mean to you personally?

Mark 9:30-32 The Son of Adam Must Suffer

Then they left that district and went straight through Galilee. Jesus kept this journey secret for he was teaching his disciples that the Son of Man would be betrayed into the power of men, that they would kill him and that three days after his death he would rise again. But they were completely mystified by this saying, and were afraid to question him about it.

In Mark’s next story, Jesus takes time alone with his disciples. He talks with them about a secret not yet shared with the crowds. He tells them about death and resurrection. If we come to this passage with our all too common beliefs about Jesus’ death and

resurrection, we don't get it. Why is this a secret? Why do the disciples not understand it? Why do they dread even asking him about it?

Let us see if we can at least find a hint within ourselves why Mark's secrecy witnesses to our own experience. The son of Adam must suffer at the hands of his enemies and be killed. This term "son of Adam" refers to Jesus in Mark's mind. And at the same time this post-Adam new humanity is also a potential for these disciples, many other, a perhaps you and me. The vastness of what we are dealing with here is not seen if we restrict "son of Adam" to one peasant preacher, Jesus.

What does it mean to say that this new humanity will be turned over into the hands of enemies and be killed? Perhaps we can identify with those disciples who are following this manifestation of this new humanity? If we, like these disciples, want to become this new humanity, can we see that we might resist the teaching that this new humanity must suffer at the hands of the old humanity? Can we see that this message might simply not make good sense to these disciples, or to us? So here is a hint about why resurrection is such a secret: people, you and me, all of us do not want to know the whole story about how this new humanity of authentic living comes about or the full consequences of living this new humanity.

And what if we got a glimpse of the notion that the resurrection was about you and me becoming that new humanity who suffer at the hands of the old humanity? Well, that might seem rather dreadful! Perhaps this is why those disciples did not want to ask Jesus any more questions about all this. Perhaps we don't either.

What are your feelings right now about the whole idea of participating with Jesus in death to the primacy of our temporal loyalties and a resurrection to the authentic life that loves all things in the context of a devotion to the Eternal?

Mark 9:33-37 Who Wants to be First?

So they came to Capernaum. And when they were indoors he asked them, "What were you discussing as we came along?"

They were silent, for on the way they had been arguing about who should be the greatest. Jesus sat down and called the twelve, and said to them, "If any man wants to be first, he must be last and servant of all."

Then he took a little child and stood him in front of them all, and putting his arms round him, said to them, "Anyone who welcomes one little child like this for my sake is welcoming me. And the man who welcomes me is welcoming not only me but the one who sent me!"

In this story we see the disciples arguing over which of them is to be the greatest. Who is to become the Great One when Jesus is gone? Who is to be the Bishop, the Pope, the Spirit Guide, the Leader? In any movement, leadership has to be figured out.

But Jesus teaches that leadership in his movement is to be different. It is not something to argue over. Who is number one? It is the one who makes himself last of all, the servant of everyone else. Is this the role of leadership we are seeking? The total servant is number one, this servant is also one who does not really care what number he or she is. Leadership in this movement is not a status position; it is a servant role. And the first among servants is the one who serves the most.

Implied in these words is the further challenge that laying down our entire lives for our friends or for our society is the full meaning of service. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. In this context he is asking his disciples if it is indeed his sort of leadership that they are battling over.

The servant leadership of Jesus, however, is not some sort of passive slavery to the will of others. Jesus is a strong assault on the times in which he lives. He does not ask others how they want to be served. He serves them as he sees they need to be served. There is a boundless strength in this sort of servanthood. This strong man is a servant, but his servanthood is something very different from a slavery of being owned by other people.

The ritual with the child underscores again the point of humble service. It is the humble one who is to be accepted. Jesus himself is like this child. To accept Jesus as our leader is not to follow some great person, but rather to accept the ONE who is sending Jesus, an ordinary person, to us in totally humble service. Only the ONE, the Infinite Sender of the servant is great. Jesus is just a child, just a servant of the ONE. In the kingdom of God, only God is king. The rest of the members of this commonwealth of realism are just children. Anyone who wants to be the king of the kingdom of God is confused about this kingdom. Nevertheless, it is paradoxically true that the humble child, the humble servant, is indeed a king in this kingdom of the Almighty KING.

How does this radical servant leadership challenge your own longings for status and leadership?

What would it mean for you to be a total servant?

Mark 9: 38-41 Who is One of Us?

Then John said to him, "Master, we saw somebody driving out evil spirits in your name, and we stopped him, for he is not one who follows us."

But Jesus replied, "You must not stop him. No one who exerts such power in my name would readily say anything against me. For the man who is not against us is on our side. In fact, I assure you that the man who gives you a mere drink of water in my name, because you are followers of mine, will most certainly be rewarded."

Every religious group asks the question about who is and who is not one of our adherents. But Jesus is teaching us about something more profound than who is or who

is not a member of our religious group. If the Buddha's followers are performing Christ-type miracles in the healing of human lives, don't stop them. If they are not against this healing mission, they are for it. And if a member of some other movement gives you or I a cup of water (or perhaps a big contribution) because we are true followers of Jesus, that member of that other movement will, in the deep dynamics of true living, be rewarded for that sensitive deed.

How have you experienced the need to operate beyond the boundaries of who is and who is not a member of your religious group?

How does it suit you that the league of resurrected humanity includes people who are not followers of Jesus in a Christian sense?

Mark 9: 42-49 The Cost of Integrity

"And I tell you too, that the man who disturbs the faith of one of the humblest of those who believe in me would be better off if he were thrown into the sea with a great mill-stone hung round his neck!"

"Indeed, if it is your own hand that spoils your faith, you must cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than to keep both your hands and go to the rubbish-heap, If your foot spoils your faith, you must cut it off. It is better to enter life on one foot than to keep both your feet and be thrown on to the rubbish-heap. And if your eye leads you astray, pluck it out. It is better for you to go one-eyed into the kingdom of God than to keep both eyes and be thrown on to the rubbish-heap, where 'their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched'. For everyone will be salted by fire."

This passage begins with a challenge to respect and honor all the trusting persons in our lives, however humble of body, mind, or consciousness they may be. Basically, we are not to lead others into our lack of trust. We are not to lead others into our despairs. The cost to us of such behavior is profoundly serious. The images used in this passage are a barrage of tough sayings--drowned in the sea, thrown into unquenchable fire.

Most of us in the modern world stumble over the image of "hell." For so long we have been taught literal ideas about some awful place people go after they die. This tends to cloud the everyday interpretation of the term "hell." A full metaphorical translation of the Gospel of Mark for our time requires us to raise this question: "What state of being that we all experience might be pointed to with this word 'hell'?" "Despair" is a fruitful answer to that question, but what is despair? Despair is finding yourself trapped in a life that you hate, and from which you wish only to escape, but from which there is no escape.

With that understanding of "hell" in mind, let us listen again to the tough sayings in these verses. If we do not honor those who trust the Eternal Mystery of the All, then we are living in despair ourselves, and we are leading others into despair. Despair is the worst of all possible outcomes for a human life. Losing a hand, a foot, or an eye would be preferable to being in despair. So if you or I ever need to make a choice between being one-eyed and being in despair, this passage advises us to choose the former.

How are you been tempted to allow your trust in the Eternal Mystery of it All to be side-tracked?

How do you feel challenged by the strong images of this passage?

Mark 9:50 The Dynamics of Fire and Salt

"Salt is a very good thing; but if it should lose its saltiness, what can you do to restore its flavor? You must have salt in yourselves, and live at peace with each other."

All of us will be salted by the fire of despair, despair over our clinging to the temporal factors of our lives. The fire of despair is not unknown to most of us, even though we often keep it deeply suppressed. The content of verse 9:50 indicates that our Spirit saltiness though related to the fire of despair is also a good thing. Despair is the doorway to a trust in the Infinite Reality that both occasions our despair and leads us to the overcoming that despair through repentance of the causes of that despair, forgiveness, and the courage for a redeemed life.

Trust means walking through the fire of despair and not being burned up in that fire. The Spirit has these two forms of saltiness: (1) the salty wonder of trust and (2) the salty horror of despair. In either case we are salty: we are being fired by Spirit. This passage ends with the challenge to keep our saltiness, lest our lives be without seasoning.

We might wonder what is being referred to by the ancient image of un-salty salt. In the days in which Jesus and Mark lived, the product used for salting was impure, so its saltiness might be used up, leaving only the impurities that were not salty. The Spirit meaning of this metaphor is quite clear. If we do not keep our Spirit saltiness, we are useless for the work of the Kingdom of God--that is, for the Commonwealth of authentic Realistic Living that salty people have before them.

Finally, these verses make the point that Spirit saltiness is a precondition for living at peace with one another. There is indeed a cosmic war going on between trust and despair; but among those salted with Spirit trust, no war exists. All are at peace with one another--in vital communion with one another. We may still have disagreements and misunderstandings and common conflicts, but the deeper truth is that we are united in the communion of the salty. Being at peace with Reality as a Whole makes us members of a salty community in which peace reigns.

How have you experienced these dynamics of Spirit fire and saltiness in your own life?