

Mark 7:1-8:21

THEME SENTENCE:

Everyone's heart is full of sin, so everyone needs the redemption Jesus is bringing.

The heart of the problem that Jesus came to solve

7:1-15 the problem with religion

The Pharisees thought that the law was something that could be kept (and their oral traditions provided little 'do's' and 'don'ts' to enable someone feel they'd kept it). But actually the law is given to show me that I don't keep God's standards, that I'm a sinner, and that I need a Saviour. Their regulations on washing are a good example: we can't be clean unless God makes us clean (Psalm 51:7), so insisting on ritual washings (3-5) demonstrates that their hearts are 'far from God'. Equally the spiritual-sounding 'I dedicate everything to God' (9-13) was used to excuse people from the challenge of what God commands.

7:14-23 the problem with the heart

In private (cf 4:11, 34), Jesus explains 'the parable' of 14-15. The situation is far worse than the Pharisees believed, and that is why their religion is useless: since the true problem is in the human heart, outward observances will not touch it. Unless we accept Jesus' diagnosis of the problem, we'll never understand the solution and so the cross will always seem nonsensical (cf 1 Cor 1:18f).

Jesus is the Redeemer for everyone

7:1-23 states the full extent of the problem, and so raises a question: if religion cannot deal with our heart-originating defilement, then who/what can?

7:24-30 Who can be redeemed?

This story answers the question: so who can be saved? 'Dogs' is a normal Jewish term of abuse for Gentiles who (they thought) were the outsiders God had not chosen. But the story of this woman makes clear that God's grace extends beyond Jewish boundaries: her humble, trusting dependence is the international way for anyone to receive redemption. The next 2 stories are also in Gentile territory:

7:31-37 Jesus is the promised Redeemer [1]

Parallel to 8:22-26's healing from blindness, here Jesus unstops deaf ears (cf 4:12 for the spiritual significance of these two things). The crowd's response (37) is a virtual quote from Isaiah 35:5-6 (and 'speech impediment' [32] only occurs elsewhere in the Bible in Isaiah 35:6): whether the crowd realise it or not, they are acknowledging the fulfilment of the OT. God's judgement is lifted, so that a highway of return can be built through the wilderness.

8:1-10 Jesus is the promised Redeemer [2]

Although some detail in this story is different from 6:30-44, the basic point is the same (and we already know the importance of the feeding miracles cf 6:52; 8:17-21). The significance here (and the reason why we have the feeding miracle a second time) is that this time it happens amongst Gentiles. The point then (as at the feeding of the 5,000) is that, because he provides 'bread from heaven', Jesus is the new-Exodus-performing Redeemer ... (and it's now further specified that this is) for all nationalities.

A possible wrong response

8:11-15 Beware! [1]

The attitude of the Pharisees reveals their heart: have they not seen what Jesus has been doing and heard what he's been saying? And the answer is that 'they may indeed see but not perceive ... hear but not understand' (4:12). Just as Herod (15) showed in 6:14-29 that he would not repent and believe despite the 'opportunity' (6:21) he was given, so the Pharisees don't want to believe but 'to test' (11).

8:14-21 Beware! [2]

The disciples are perilously close to similarly rejecting Jesus by refusing to respond to what's been revealed to them (cf 4:11-12 which draws a distinction between them and 'those [Pharisees?] outside').