

## **STUDY GUIDE:**

### **Extraordinary Life Series in the Gospel of Mark**

#### **Clean & Unclean | Mark 7:1-23**

#### ***“God helps those who help themselves.”***

That’s not a verse (from scripture anyway). It’s a phrase that many think is biblically sourced, but it actually reflects a theology that we earn God’s favor with our hard work. If I do good, God will bless me, and I’ll get my way. It’s an idea that is engrained in our American way of thinking. We espouse to a “pull yourselves up by your bootstraps” philosophy. Just work harder and things will work out. And that’s not necessarily a bad thing. But when it spills over into your spiritual life - when this idea begins to impact our view of God, it can create some issues for us. Where have you encountered by this phrase or the belief behind it? Do you have this belief now to some degree, and could you argue that it’s valid?

#### **Clean & Unclean Things**

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#### **Read Mark 7:1-23**

In chapter 7 we see a classic battle of wits between the Pharisees and Jesus. See, the pharisees for hundreds of years had been trying to adhere closely to the traditions of the elders. These traditions were rabbinic teachings that had developed to help the people apply the law for practical life situations. But these traditions had created several problems for the Jewish people:

1. The traditions had risen to the level of the Law. (What evidence of this can you pull from chapter 7? Hint check out the first several verses)
2. At some points the traditions (interpretations of Scripture) trumped the observance of the Law. This created a situation where intentional, faithful people were breaking God’s law. (see verses 8-13). Can you identify situations today where interpretation of Scripture seemingly breaks God’s law?

The issue that Jesus was confronting was that the Pharisee’s understanding of righteousness (right standing before God) was all about Justice: you get what you deserve.

What are your thoughts on justice?

What are some ways that this focus on “getting what you deserve” led the Pharisees astray?

Jesus continues to pick away at their hypocrisy in these next verses.

See, following the traditions had actually created a third problem for the Jewish believers. Because the traditions allowed them to focus on external activities that ‘made them clean’, they began to believe that they were only polluted by the outside world. If this is the case then they simply needed to work harder to maintain the boundaries between them and the messy world.

But what Jesus points out is that people are not polluted by the world. It is in fact, the other way around. And this can be a humbling reality to face.

The truth is that the uber religious were unable or unwilling to see the *need* for a messiah. They had been hoping and waiting for someone to come save them but really, if they were honest...they thought that they were doing a pretty good job of saving themselves. They couldn't see what Jesus was offering them because they were too busy trying to avoid the reality that the rules were never going to fix them.

- If the Law wasn't given to fix us, what was it given for?

We can find ourselves with the same problem. We choose to believe that we've generally got it together and that we aren't as bad as the really bad people out there. So we got caught in this same trap that had enslaved the Jewish believers in Jesus' day. We just need to try harder to follow the rules.

If we are good enough and kind enough, if we give enough and smile enough and if for goodness sake we keep the dirty messy world at bay, then maybe we could be good. God will like this, right?

But can we be honest for a second here?

It's not working.

- In what ways are you tempted to believe that you can "earn God's favor"?

Facing the reality of our brokenness is what Isaiah speaks of in **Isaiah 6:5**. Read now. Discuss.

Warning: Jesus didn't point out our broken to make us feel badly about ourselves. The truth is that understanding and embracing grace only begins when we face our own frailty. We are a mess and there's nothing we can do about it. But God has a plan: **Grace**.

- What is grace? Search as a group for some different definitions and try to pin down your understanding.

**Romans 5:20-21** (The Message version):

"All that passing laws against sin did was produce more lawbreakers. But sin didn't, and doesn't, have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down. All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that's the end of it. But Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life—a life that goes on and on and on, world without end."

**How does a Jesus follower live differently because of grace?**

**How does grasping grace affect your love of God and love of others?**

