

**THE CONFIDENCE TRAP 10 – A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF MARK  
MARK 7:1-23  
November 27, 2016**

Last Thursday, I had a conflict of interest, a moment where my interests and powers potentially conflicted with the interest of those around me. You see, there was a hot item in the Thanksgiving buffet at grandma's house, a new item. A cousin's wife brought bacon wrapped green beans, which in my opinion is the only great way to eat green beans. At any rate, there was a buzz in the room. These were new, and they were delicious. People were asking about the recipe. It was a big deal. The conflict of interest came when I gathered my appetite and dropped my dignity as I headed back for seconds or thirds. There was one succulent bacon wrapped morsel left. Many had not gone back for seconds, so I was left wondering, how do I get the last one without being the person that got the last one? How do I do what I want to do when I know everyone else wants to do exactly what I want to do?

This is the moment when we all get really creative with the last piece of pie, the last scoop of dressing. Whatever it is, we can talk ourselves into almost anything. The solution, it turns out, was quite simple. I get the last piece of bacon goodness for one of my kids, and then I eat it off their plate. Okay, I didn't do that, but I can tell you a few scenarios danced through my head. How do I get what I want when I'm sure many others want to do the same thing?

Conflicts of interest are a hot topic at the moment as our president-elect manages (at least according to his own statements) a sizeable fortune. What happens when he owns a golf course on foreign soil, and he doesn't want that country to put up wind power in that area because it would obstruct golf views? Any other way, he might be interested in renewable energy except when it causes a problem for him. What does he do when foreign diplomats are suddenly very interested in staying in his hotels while visiting, which immediately lines his pockets?

These same conflicts of interest would have happened if Secretary Clinton got elected and she had to explain away certain donations from foreign dignitaries to her self-named charitable foundation. When money is on the line, when appetites can be satisfied, when positions can be strengthened, we can be very creative at explaining away a situation.

There is a great conflict of interest story in Mark 7. Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees regarding a violation of a tradition, and he questions them about a violation of the law. They have a great little explanation for why they do what they do. I want you to see the human condition that we are all prone to conflicts of interests. That we all tend to explain things away.

#### *Mark 7:1-5*

Around the time of Jesus, practicing Jews had become accustomed to the practice of ceremonially washing their hands before every meal. They would take a few ounces of water and rinse their hands from their fingertips down to their wrist. This was ceremonial not hygienic in nature. This practice began centuries earlier because the priests in Exodus 30 were commanded to wash their hands before they entered the tabernacle. That law evolved into this tradition. The Jews saw the law of the priests becoming pure and clean before God in Exodus 30, and they extrapolated that and exponentially multiplied it out into every day life. If washing your hands before entering the tabernacle is good, then washing yourself every day before every meal must be great. This law morphed and became a tradition. Jesus and his disciples run head long into this tradition and a controversy ensues.

The Pharisees had come down from Jerusalem to see what Jesus was up to. According to the previous chapter, the disciples and Jesus were on the Sea of Galilee, so the Pharisees had traveled some distance to see what Jesus was up to. They see some of the disciples eating with unwashed hands. Again, this was not a hygienic issue. This was a ceremonial religious issue. It was a practice, a custom that the Pharisees connected with being right before God. They would wash the stain from their hands and then eat.

Just as a reminder, if you have spent time in the Christian church, you are used to seeing the Pharisees as the “bad guys.” For a first century Jew, these were not the bad guys. My professor from seminary, Haddon Robinson, likened the Pharisees to the men in white hats from a western movie. You automatically knew they were the “good guys,” and the good guys washed their hands. It was an act of piety and purity. When the disciples were eating their food without washing their hands, everyone would have been a bit shocked.

#### *Mark 7:5-8*

Jesus rebukes the Pharisees in this moment, and he quotes from Isaiah 29. The book of Isaiah was written largely to the northern kingdom of Israel. Chapter 29 starts out addressing Ariel, which is another name for Jerusalem. Isaiah rebukes the people for going through the motions but missing the message. They knew how to make sacrifices and they knew how to pray but they did not know God.

Then Jesus gets to the heart of the issue and addresses their dedication to religion that completely forsakes relationship. Jesus says, “You are so enslaved to religious traditions that you have missed the heart of God. You are scrubbing the stain as a way of life, and you forgot the precious thing you were trying to restore.” Then he gives them an example of what he means.

#### *Mark 7: 9-13*

Jesus’ example here is nuanced and complicated. Two things you need to understand here, 1) honor thy father and mother is a largely misunderstood commandment. We have reduced this commandment to mean something akin to respect your mother and father. We teach kids to obey this command by listening to their parents and obeying their parents. However, this command means so much more than that. Most scholars understand this to be a command to care for your parents in their old age. Most notably, this is a command to care for your parents monetarily. In this culture, there were no pension plans and there was no social security. Children were your social security. Each generation was hinged to

the next one. Parents took care of their kids, and when they got to the age where they could no longer work, their children cared for them. The cycle would occur again as the next generation reciprocally would be cared for and then do the caring for later in their lives. Honor your father and mother was a very practical and difficult command to follow because it required your time and your cash. 2) The second thing to note in this passage, Corban was a human tradition wherein people would promise their assets to God's use. This does not mean they put them to God's use, but they set them aside for God's use. In all likelihood, this was an early version of a religious tax shelter. People got to the age where they saw expensive care on the horizon for their elderly parents, and they sheltered this money by promising it to God's use, Corban. The implication here is that as time elapsed, after parents died, the promise faded and what was once Corban was now used for personal reasons.

Corban is the ultimate workaround for any conflict of interest. Shorthand for Corban might as well be, "Yeah, but. Yeah, I know what the rule is, but that doesn't apply to me. Yeah, I know what the law is, but I don't interpret it that way. Yeah, I know the commandment, but I have a good reason to do it differently." We are all good at Corban.

We are all good at "Yeah, but." You know your job is eating up all of your time and keeping you from your family and you say, "Yeah, but God gave me this job for my family, so I have to keep it." You know your dating relationship is completely unhealthy and immoral and you say, "Yeah, but I keep it so that I can be a Christian witness to this person who I am dating." You know you drink too much and you say, "Yeah, but I don't want to give it up because I need to be relevant and relatable to my friends who don't know Jesus." You know your house doesn't fit your budget and you say, "Yeah, but I wanted to be in the right neighborhood," so you keep it by promising yourself you will use it for ministry like having church functions there or small group meetings. In reality, in all of these "Yeah, but" vignettes, we use holy language to justify holding on to our particular conflicts of interest.

Jesus is staring at these rich Pharisees and their religiously sheltered money, and he tells them they can't see their conflict of interest. They are claiming something profane is

actually holy. The Ten Commandments are broken up into two sections, the first four relate to our relationship with God and the final six are about our interpersonal relationships. What we often miss is that these two groups are interrelated. How we relate to others affects our relationship with God, and our relationship with God affects our relationship with others. These men were portraying themselves as pious as they promised their cash to God, so they could forgo their responsibility to their parents. Jesus is disgusted by this. He is saying, "You have created a loophole with manmade traditions, so you can break God's law. You are justifying your, 'Yeah but.' Everyone else can see this massive conflict of interest, but you have convinced them it is somehow a part of God's design. Your traditions serve you more than they serve the Father."

Here is the great power of this passage today, what is your own Corban? The practice or passion or activity that you can explain away, the thing when measured against the rest of scripture is clearly short of God's best for you, but you can explain it away. You can use tradition and everyone else around you to solidify your position. Or maybe everyone around you has been doing it for so long, you haven't stopped to think about if your position is rooted in scripture or tradition.

You've heard the story before, but it's worth repeating around the holiday season. A man marries into a family and hopes to invite many people over for Thanksgiving. But his new wife says they can't invite too many people over because they have to cut the ends off the ham. The husband is flabbergasted because he wants a lot of people to attend and he has never heard of cutting the ends off a ham. But then again, he isn't a cook and maybe it's like cutting off the ends of vegetables that you shouldn't eat. So he asks his new wife, "Why do you cut the ends off the ham?" She says, she learned to cook from her mom and her mom always cut the ends off the ham, "Mom, why do you cut the ends off the ham?" Mom says she learned cooking from her mom and she always did it that way. Finally, they get to grandma, "Why do you cut the ends off the ham? Is it too chewy? Is it unsafe to eat? Does it ruin the flavor?" "No, we just didn't have much money and I had a small pan, so I cut off the ends to make it fit the pan."

Are we as Christians living in modern conflicts of interest and don't even realize it? Can we explain things away or have we leaned on traditions instead of scripture? Listen to what Jesus says are real problems for us.

*Mark 7: 14-23*

It's not about the traditions, but there are real things that can rot your soul, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

There is something in here for everyone. There is something in here to offend and step on everyone's toes. There are plenty of conflicts of interest; there are plenty of things in here that can be explained away. There is plenty of room for "Yeah, but." There is something in here for liberal progressives, rigid conservatives and everyone in between. All of these issues are filled with conflicts of interests. Thus, we can explain any of these away. The genius of Corban is that when you slap another title on something, it somehow makes it seem less like a sin. By slapping another title on it like "Corban," we can make anything make sense. Sexual immorality is really just pleasurable freedom. Theft is really just using the tax laws to your advantage. Murder is really just keeping America safe through drone warfare. Adultery is really just a harmless mistake. Greed is just healthy capitalism. Deceit is just keeping state secrets. Lewdness is just authenticity. Envy is just motivation. Slander and arrogance are just righteous indignation. Folly is just having some "me time."

There is wiggle room on all of these. These are all pretty clear-cut conflicts of interest but we can re-label them or "Yeah, but" them. If Jesus were talking to the modern church today, I'm guessing he'd acknowledge how impressive our worship services are and how efficient are mission trips are. But he might say, "What about the poor that you step over or systematically overlook? What about your enemies you'd rather bomb than pray for? What about your addiction that you'd rather feed than confront?" Big or small, personal or corporate we have our own Corbans today. Our own moments where we re-label and explain away and "Yeah, but."

My oldest daughter just turned six, and I was thinking back on her antics over the years. I was reminded of how she applied a very mischievous tactic to get her way. Whether she was asking to take a toy to school (which is not allowed) or whether she was taking a toy from her brother and clutching it like it was her own, she has come up with an impressive response. When I tell her we can't take the toy with us, she says, "Yeah, but it is very precious to me." When she takes a toy from her brother and we tell her to give it back, she says, "But it is very precious to me." Keep in mind, she is not addressing her disobedience or thievery. Without regard to facts or reality, she has a simple refrain, "But it is very special to me." She doesn't realize that doesn't matter. How often do we do that with our conflicts of interest, with our holy holdouts. God looks at the thing we are holding so tightly and says, "My word says no, that is going to hurt you or separate you from your loved ones, and we simply say, "But it is very precious to me."

It's clear we aren't meant to be greedy, but we say, "Self-reliance is very precious to me." It's clear we aren't meant to use violence, but we say, "Security is very precious to me." It's clear we aren't meant to be sexually immoral or dependent upon substances, but we say, "Pleasure is very precious to me." Yeah, but. Corban. Whatever you want to call it, whether we are using religious reasoning, human traditions or simple appeals to our own preciouses, we can figure out a way to explain away obvious conflicts of interest.

In recent decades, most presidents have tried hard to avoid conflicts of interest by putting all of their assets in a blind trust when they take office. They turn their assets over to a money manager, and they relinquish control so they don't have to worry about their policies or decisions possibly being linked to their own gains. The offer of Jesus in the gospels is a grand exchange, his life for ours and our lives for his. He gave himself up for us and then he asks us to do the same, to die to ourselves and wake to new life in Christ. To put our old selves, desires and will in his keeping. Trusting that what he has to offer far exceeds what we can attain. Simply put God's best for you is better than your best for you.

You are relinquishing your assets, aspirations and goals to a blind trust. Here is the great beauty of this blind trust: you will find freedom and joy. You can take life as it comes and not be worried about what may happen or what you should do. If your life is no longer about the rat race or no longer about endlessly feeding your appetites, there is real joy to be found. When you have to spend all of your time slapping Corban titles on things to calm your conscience or when you have to endlessly say, "Yeah, but," to explain away your choices, you will get tired and jaded. If you can return to scripture and start to embody the simple proclamations of the text, walk humbly, love justice, walk with God, love your enemies, be generous, serve others, when you don't have to explain and justify why you can't or won't do these things, joy and freedom will be waiting for you there.

We do this because Jesus faced the ultimate conflict of interest. He was being unjustly accused and led to his own death. If there was ever a time for "Yeah, but" it was then and there. Jesus probably had an interest in not being subjected to torture and death. Jesus probably had an interest in not being mocked and shamed. But the way all conflicts of interest are best solved boils down to a person seeking the good of the whole above their own. It is a person laying down their advancement for the sake of the common good. That is the heart of the gospel. That is the heart of this great exchange. Will you trust him this week?