

The Significance of Mk 7:19 (“*Thus He* declared all foods clean”) and the Question of Christians Today Being Obligated to Keep the Mosaic Law

J. Paul Tanner, ThM, PhD
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INTRODUCTION

There is a certain segment of Christianity today that is not only attempting to return to the Jewish roots of our faith but also declaring that the Mosaic Law (the Old Covenant) has not been abrogated and is therefore obligatory for Christians today. Such a position is a direct assault on the doctrine of sanctification and flies in the face of Galatians 5:1, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” As is well known, the Apostle Paul wrote Galatians, attempting to ward off the influence that the Judaizers were having upon the churches of Galatia that he had brought the gospel to. Paul went on to caution the Galatians of allowing the Judaizers’ demand for Law-keeping to infiltrate the churches:

Galatians 5:7–10 (NASB95)

⁷ You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion *did* not *come* from Him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump *of dough*. ¹⁰ I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is.

Paul—quite passionately—insisted that the Galatian churches not allow this false teaching to be tolerated. There are, as has been traditionally understood, a great many passages in the New Testament substantiating the truth that the Mosaic Law (the Old Covenant) came to an end with the death of Christ on the cross (e.g., Rom 7:1-6; 1 Cor 9:19-21). The shedding of Christ’s precious blood inaugurated the New Covenant, thereby displacing the Old.

One particular passage in the New Testament is particularly relevant to this discussion, namely, Mark 7:18-19. This occurs in a context in which Jesus had rebuked the Jewish religious leaders for holding to “the traditions of the elders” (a way of referring to the Oral Law). In a subsequent conversation while alone with the disciples, He addressed the issue of the Jewish dietary laws.

Mark 7:18–19 (NASB95)

¹⁸ And He said to them, “Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (*Thus He* declared all foods clean.)

In a recent conversation, this verse was pointed out to a fellow Christian who advocated the obligation of keeping the Law today. His reply was that the latter part (that in parenthesis) was not actually in the Greek text. In this short paper, I would like to challenge that assertion and contend that it is most certainly in the Greek text and cannot be so cavalierly dismissed.

MARK 7:19c AND THE GREEK MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE

The NASB translation of Mk 7:19c reads, “*Thus He* declared all foods clean.” The words “*Thus He*” are placed in italics, because those words are technically not in the Greek text. But that is not to say that the whole statement is missing in the Greek. Far from it! The words “declared all foods clean” are most definitely in the Greek text, as attested by all known manuscripts. This is not a matter of some Greek manuscripts having the statement and some not. There is some minor manuscript *variation* as to the form of the verb (meaning, “declares clean”), but the statement itself is not missing. Most manuscripts have a participial phrase, καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα. The first word is a present participle form of the verb καθαρίζω (transliterated, *katharizō*). The following diagram depicts the Greek text that most known manuscripts have:

| | | |
|------------------------|--------------|------------------------------|
| καθαρίζων | πάντα | τὰ βρώματα |
| <i>katharizōn</i> | <i>panta</i> | <i>ta brōmata</i> |
| Present Participle | Adjective | Direct Obj. (with def. art.) |
| <i>declaring clean</i> | <i>all</i> | <i>foods</i> |

In a few Greek manuscripts, the verb *katharizō* appears in a variant form, but this is a minor issue that does not affect the significance of the statement in Mk 7:19c.¹ Recognition that this statement is definitely supported by the Greek text is affirmed by virtually every English translation:

- NASB: “*Thus He* declared all foods clean.”
 NIV: “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.”
 NRSV: “Thus he declared all foods clean.”
 ESV: “Thus he declared all foods clean.”
 NET: “This means all foods are clean.”
 KJV: “purging all meats.”
 NKJV: “*thus* purifying all foods.”

¹ The manuscript evidence for the verb in Mk 7:19c is:

1. καθαρίζων (Present Active Participle, Masculine Nominative Singular):
 Ⲛ, A, B, L, W, Δ, Θ, 0274, and some *Byz* mss (and many minor mss)
2. καθαρίζον (Present Ptc Act, Neuter Nominative Sg):
 K, Γ, 33, 700, 1010, 2542, and some *Byz* mss
3. καθαρίζει (Present Indicative Active, 3rd person, Sg): D
4. καθαρίζεται (Present Indicative Passive, 3rd person, Sg): 1047, syr^s

The reading καθαρίζων is certainly to be preferred. R. T. France points out, “καθαρίζον and the indicative versions καὶ καθαρίζει (-εται) are best understood as attempts to ‘correct’ the syntax by scribes who did not recognize the parenthetical nature of the clause. That they produce no appropriate sense is not in their favour (as ‘lectio difficilior’) when there is so obvious an explanation for their invention” (*The Gospel of Mark; A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans], 276).

THE PROPER TRANSLATION OF THE PARTICIPLE IN MARK 7:19c

The verb *katharizō* in Mk 7:19c means to “purify through ritual cleansing, *make clean, declare clean.*”² The participle *katharizōn* must be seen in relation to the main verbal clause that precedes it, which are the words “And He said” at the beginning of verse 18. [In the Greek text, verses 18-19 are not two separate sentences, but rather one long sentence]. The participle is what grammarians call a *circumstantial participle*, meaning that it reflects some circumstance about the main verb (there is a relationship between the main verb and the participle). In this case, the participle is probably best understood syntactically as indicating *purpose* or *result*. Based on this understanding of the syntax, the appropriate translation then becomes:

“And He said to them . . . , [*with the result that He*] declared clean all foods.”

Translators, of course, feel obligated to express things in proper English. Thus, often two sentences are used to translate the Greek text. Translators may also add a word or two to make sure the understanding is properly conveyed in the English translation. Since the participle is understood to be a *circumstantial participle of result*, the word “Thus” was also added to the NASB translation to bring this out. This is proper and normal procedure in translation work.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARK 7:19c

Having established that Mk 7:19c has solid manuscript support, attention will now be given to the significance of the verse. Most commentators acknowledge that the words of Mk 7:19c were not spoken by Christ to his disciples *at that time*. Rather, this is regarded as an editorial comment made by Mark at the time he was writing his gospel account. That he did so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit assures us that the statement is true and what God wanted understood. R. T. France, for instance, asserts:

The syntax clearly marks out καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα as a parenthetical editorial comment, since there is no masculine singular subject within the reported speech to which it can relate (hence the emendations found in some MSS, representing attempts to ‘correct’ the syntax by those who failed to recognize the nature of the clause The subject therefore is Jesus (the subject of λέγει, v. 18a), whom Mark thus interprets as ‘cleansing all food’ in the sense of declaring that it is no longer to be regarded as ritually ‘unclean.’³

The final part, then, of this sentence (v 19c) is a statement of the *implication* of Christ’s words that were made to His disciples. Almost all Bible translations and most commentators understand this to be a parenthetical comment made by Mark, writing his gospel account much later in a time when the Law was no longer binding upon Christians. This, however, does not make it any the less true. The Holy Spirit moved Mark to include this comment. [See Mark 3:30 for another example of an editorial comment. If Peter is the source of information behind much of Mark’s gospel, as is commonly believed, Peter might have made this comment to Mark. In any case, these are *Holy Spirit inspired words*]. Therefore, what is said in Mk 7:19c is a truth for

² Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 488). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³ France, 291.

Christians living under the New Covenant. All foods are ceremonially clean to us, and thus by eating foods that were once considered ceremonially impure under the Mosaic Law, we are not sinning (cf. Col 2:16-17). Rather, our primary concern should be for what goes in and out of our heart.

This conclusion is echoed in the excellent Pillar commentary by James R. Edwards, Mark's parenthetical declaration that "all foods [are] 'clean'" (v. 19) thus reveals his understanding of Jesus' position on the matter of clean versus unclean foods. This declaration takes precedence over the dietary regulations of both the oral and written laws (e.g., Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). Again in Mark, the teaching of Jesus is supremely authoritative, superseding the Torah itself.

CONCLUSION

There are several statements in the New Testament that either assert or imply that the Mosaic Law (the Old Covenant) ceased as an obligation upon the Jewish people with the death of Christ on the cross (it was never imposed upon Gentiles). Since then, all believers—whether Jew or Gentile—are under the New Covenant and are freed from an obligation of trying to live in obedience to the commands of the Law. Being under grace, they are freed from the Law, but they are not free to do as they please. Obedience is the expected response of the Christian to the Lord. Yet this obedience is one that comes by walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, as the Apostle Paul made clear in Galatians 5.

The verse in Mark 7:19c affirms that believers under the New Covenant are free to eat whatever food they so choose. They are not obligated to keep the dietary laws of the Old Covenant. There may be wisdom in not eating certain foods that were forbidden by the Law, but that is a matter of voluntary choice for the believer. The main point is that Mark 7:19c provides a good case in point to support the truth taught elsewhere in the New Testament that believers today are not under the Old Covenant Law. Believers today are freed from the Law, and their responsibility is to submit to Christ as Lord, drawing upon the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to live the Christian life.