

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 1, 2024

+ Mark 7:1-8; 14-15; 21-23 +

“Out of the Heart Comes Uncleaness; into the Heart Comes Cleanness”

The Pharisees and some of the experts in the law came from Jerusalem and gathered around Jesus. They saw some of his disciples eating bread with unclean (that is, unwashed) hands. In fact, the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they scrub their hands with a fist, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions they adhere to, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, kettles, and dining couches. The Pharisees and the experts in the law asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders? Instead they eat bread with unclean hands.”

He answered them, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it is written:

These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

They worship me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were doctrines.

“You abandon God’s commandment but hold to human tradition like the washing of pitchers and cups, and you do many other such things.”

He called the crowd to him again and said, “Everyone, listen to me and understand. There is nothing outside of a man that can make him unclean by going into him. But the things that come out of a man are what make a man unclean...”

“In fact, from within, out of people’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, slander, arrogance, and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and make a person unclean.”

I have an easy question for you: When the opportunity arises for you to swipe something that belongs to someone else, should you do it? Here’s another easy one: If your coworker or classmate is hungry, should you offer her a piece of your tasty sandwich? One more easy question: The next time you feel frustrated, should you relieve it by blurting out the precious name of your Savior? Hopefully, none of those questions challenged you. Because those are all questions that God’s law answers for us quickly and easily: don’t steal; feed the hungry; use your Lord’s name to pray, praise, and thank – not in vain.

When God’s law speaks on a matter, then it’s decided for us. But God’s law doesn’t speak on everything. In fact, it doesn’t speak on most things. The fancy theological term for those matters on which the law of God does not speak is adiaphora. More colloquially, we might call these the gray areas of life. We should know, however, that God does guide us in how to make decisions on things his law does not address. For example, the Word of God does tell to give him glory in everything we do. And that should guide our gray area decisions. For example: a Christian high school senior is free to choose just about any career. But she will want to ask herself: which career will glorify God best? Where do my strongest gifts lie? What will give me joy so I glorify God by working with all my heart?

Give glory to God: the guiding principle one in the gray areas of life. The second principle is to do that which will benefit your neighbor most. So, for example, a husband may have to decide whether to take his wife out tonight or share a quiet night with her watching Law and Order. God’s Word does not speak on this matter. But he will ask himself: what would she like more? (And then probably ask her to find out.)

So: what gives God the most glory? What serves my neighbor best? The final principle has to do with your conscience. Your conscience is not perfect, but it is God's gift. And everyone's conscience is a little bit different. When you are in a gray area, God commands you not to violate your conscience. There is no command against eating meat, but if it makes you feel guilty, don't do it. There is no command to wash your car every week, but if your conscience compels you, do it. Why? Think of it like this: breaking a command of God is like punching him. Bad idea. Violating your conscience is like taking a swing and missing: you're not violating a command, but you are violating the gift of conscience that God gave you. If you take a swing at your Father, even if you don't land a punch, he still won't like it. He gave you that conscience, so follow it when his Word doesn't tell you what to do.

Give God glory. Serve your neighbor. Follow your conscience. These are God's principles for gray area decision making. And now the one that has to do directly with today's Gospel. It has to do with that third principle of the conscience: don't let anyone tie your conscience up with their own rules. On matters where God's Word does not speak, don't let anyone speak for God. Don't let anyone make up rules and tell you that you must follow them to be a real Christian. First, such people put them on God's throne when they make their own rules equal to his own. And second, if you follow those rules, you condone that blasphemy.

There is no law in God's Word – Old Testament or New – about scrubbing hands up to the wrist before eating, or washing pitchers or cups. But the religious leaders of Jesus' day made up rules about these things and bound the consciences of the people. The Son of God was having none of it: **"You abandon God's commandment but hold to human tradition like the washing of pitchers and cups, and you do many other such things."** And there's the real heart of it: when people make up rules and bind consciences with them, it takes the focus off the actual law of God. If I'm busy scrubbing and counting steps and straining at gnats, it is all the less attention I can give to God's actual commands.

And this is what Jesus wants us to know first and foremost about the actual law of God: we cannot keep it, because we're corrupted to the core: **"What comes out of a man, that is what makes him unclean. In fact, from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, slander, arrogance, and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from the inside and make a person unclean."** Scripture tells us to flee temptation. It also says bad company corrupts good character. But even if you somehow managed to flee from all outside temptation and to remove all evil influences from around you, you'd still be unclean. We are conceived and born that way, stained by sin. The evil that comes out is only the symptom of the disease: uncleanness within.

And you can't get away from the uncleanness within. Christians have tried. They've climbed trees in the wilderness to cleanse themselves from lust. No women, no lust, right? Wrong. Because it's in us. Monks and nuns built high walls to separate themselves from the impurity of the world. But monasteries and nunneries often became morally filthier than the world at large. Why? Because they took their uncleanness with them.

Also, it does no good to blame anything on the outside for the sinful filth inside of me. If I am glutton, the food is not to blame. If I am drunk, the booze is not to blame. They remain good gifts of God. It is my filth within that abuses them: **"Everyone, listen to me and understand. There is nothing outside a man that can make him unclean by going into him. But the things that come out of a man are what make him**

unclean." My unclean gluttony is to blame for taking in a hurtful amount of food; my unclean desire to relieve stress with alcohol – that's what's unclean, not Johnnie Walker.

This is why it makes no sense to invent more rules that bind the conscience. We don't need more rules to follow than the ones God has given us. They are more than enough to condemn us for being unclean from the inside out – thoroughly unclean.

But now look closely at what Jesus said: **"What comes out of a man...nothing outside of a man...a person unclean."** When Jesus speaks of the uncleanness within, he speaks about "a man" and "a person" like you and me: descendants of Adam and Eve who have inherited their sin, all the way down to the present. Jesus was also born a man, a person, but not like us. His conception was pure, by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. He inherited no filth from Adam or from anyone else. Mary laid divine purity in the manger.

Not only was Jesus born clean, he maintained his cleanness. No bad company, no temptation, no negative influence stained his perfection. Not even Satan could ruin his pristine righteousness with the offer of all the kingdoms of the world.

The perfectly clean Jesus carried his perfection to the Upper Room the night before he died. That night he wrapped a towel around his waist and bent down to wash his disciples' physically dirty feet. It was a perfect act of service and an example for all Jesus' people to follow, but it was also an object lesson: **He came to Simon Peter, who asked him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me." "Lord, not just my feet," Simon Peter replied, "but also my hands and my head!" Jesus told him, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet, but his body is completely clean. And you are clean."**

The clean life of Jesus cleanses us. And so does the blood he shed the next day: **And the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, purifies us from all sin.** Blood normally stains and makes unclean, but Jesus' blood is holy. And so it cleanses from all sin. This is how God sees you: clean in the perfection of Jesus' life, cleansed from all sin by the blood he shed on the cross.

And that is how God will receive you into his heavenly kingdom: clothed in the white robe of Jesus' righteousness, washed clean by his blood. Out of the heart comes our uncleanness. Into our hearts comes the cleanness of Christ through faith.

Jesus stayed clean. He rose from the filth of the grave to prove it. Where others go to rot and return to dust, Jesus saw no decay. He sat up, calmly folded his grave clothes and walked out. And so will you, glorified like him, never to be touched again by the filth of death.

It is how God sees us through faith in Jesus, how he will receive us, and how he will raise us: pure, holy, clean in Christ.

Until he receives us clean in Christ, we still live with the filth of sin in us. Our souls will not shake it until God calls us home, our bodies until he raises them. So until then we must also remember: we are more than that sin within. We are also the perfection of Christ. We are covered by his righteousness and cleansed of our sin by his blood, people who carry within them the promise of a resurrection. And that is how God sees us: clean in Christ. We are dirty and clean at the same time, but to God we are clean in Christ.

This creates a daily strife and struggle in the Christian's heart. The evil within me and the righteousness of Christ battle daily. And we must struggle. As we struggle, this truth strengthens us: Christ is stronger than our sin. His cleanness is mightier than our uncleanness.

And that is how we strive to live: in the purity of our Savior. When impure thoughts rise up, Christ is pure and strong, and he is power to think and live cleanly. When greed stirs inside, Christ is there to forgive and cleanse and subdue. He is there in his Word, in his Supper, in baptism's water where we rise up with him to live in righteousness. As evil works its way from the inside out, so does Jesus' cleanness. Evil comes out of us because of the evil within. But now the righteousness of Christ has gone into our hearts, and he is stronger than our sin. So the cleanness that has gone in now comes out of his people

He has made us clean. That is who we are to God. Be who you are. Live clean in Christ, who makes you clean. Amen.