

15th S. after Pentecost - 9/1/24 SM, SJ

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and² saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed.³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"⁶ He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: " "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.¹⁵ Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.' "²⁰ He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.'²¹ For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,²² greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.²³ All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"

In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, dear fellow redeemed:

When we hear the words "clean" and "unclean," I'm guessing we have a tendency to think of sickness and diseases, or dirt and germs. Lepers, of course, had to separate themselves from others and warn them that they were "unclean."

Sometimes in the Bible clean and unclean did have to do with sicknesses and diseases, but perhaps more than anything else, God was pointing out actions and things that were helpful or harmful to their spiritual well-being.

So how do we identify and avoid things that are spiritually harmful to us? What should we do about them? Let us consider today:

How Do We Become Spiritually Clean or Unclean?

1. Uncleanliness does not come from unwashed hands or certain foods
2. Uncleanliness comes from evil thoughts and actions
3. Cleanliness comes through Jesus alone

1. Uncleanliness does not come from unwashed hands or certain foods

Some of the Jews were upset and came to Jesus because the disciples had eaten food without first washing their hands. But they didn't want the disciples to wash because of a concern about germs, but because the Jews had made up a religious rule that required people to wash their hands before eating. Mark's Gospel records it this way: **(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)**

So these Jews came to Jesus claiming that his disciples had upset God by failing to wash their hands before eating. However, their claims weren't based on Scripture, but on the rules written in a Jewish book called the "Mishnah." This book not only said that hands had to be washed, but it also said that the water had to go up to the wrist and how much water needed to be used. That these rules were man-made and not God-made is made clear when the Jews ask Jesus: **"Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"**

Too many people of Jesus' day had the idea that not eating pork or not drinking blood, washing your hands before you eat, giving 10 percent of your cattle, your grain and even your herbs could make you holy before God. But rather than bringing them closer to God, Jesus told the Jews that these customs did not bring them closer to God, but showed that they had forsaken God: He called them hypocrites, people who pretend to believe, but really don't believe. **He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."**

Unfortunately, people still make up their own rules today, and believe that by following these man-made rules, they can come closer to God. People believe that by living in a monastery, not marrying, repeating the same prayers over and over without even thinking about the words, not drinking alcohol, avoiding caffeine, not playing cards, etc., that

these actions make them better than their neighbors in the eyes of God. To them also Jesus says: **"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."**

2. Uncleaness comes from evil thoughts and actions

So how do we become spiritually unclean in the sight of God? **Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean . . . For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.**

Sinful thoughts and actions make us "unclean" and unacceptable before God. Food, washing, clothing and all such things don't effect our status in God's eyes one iota. Mark even tells us in v.19 that by these words **Jesus declared all foods "clean."**

Jesus here displays the basic difference between the religion of the pharisees and Christianity. The pharisees believed that man was basically good and had the ability to do things that were pleasing to God. Christianity knows that we are altogether sinful, and we are unable to please God by nature even the tiniest little bit. The Bible tells us that God looked at man and saw that the **thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.** (Gen 6:5) Likewise King David teaches us in the 51st Psalm: **Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.**

If our hearts are tainted by sin, then our entire relationship with God is tainted. If we hold hatred, jealousy, lust or greed within in our hearts, those actions are incompatible with the life that God calls us to lead. If we are thinking of how we benefit from an action, then we are not **doing everything to the glory of God**, and we are guilty of selfishness and idolatry.

True godliness must begin within us, placing God and his Word above all us. True godliness follows the example of the young Samuel, who said, **Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.** True godliness takes God at his Word, believes what he tells us, and doesn't question, doesn't doubt, doesn't worry.

3. Cleanness comes through Jesus alone

Finally, we learn today that true cleanness comes through Jesus alone. The Pharisees failed to find holiness and purity, not simply because of their outward actions but because they didn't look to Christ. **No one comes to the Father except through me**, Jesus tells us. Without faith in Jesus, **it is impossible to please God**, the Scriptures teach us.

Only the perfect actions and the loving sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ could make our huge pile of sins disappear. Only Jesus' blood is holy enough and precious enough to be accepted by our heavenly Father as sufficient payment for the debt of sin that we owe him. Only the perfect life and perfect death of God's Son is able to make us clean before God. Not our actions, not our thoughts, not our very best efforts will earn us eternal life. Isaiah teaches us that **all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.**

But Jesus' words in our text also show that it is our inner attitude that is most important in determining if our actions are pleasing to God. Actions performed in faith, actions performed with hearts that are filled with love for God -- those are the actions that God desires. And these actions are acceptable to God not as the basis for eternal life, but because God has moved us through his Holy Spirit to desire to live this way.

Being in church isn't pleasing to God unless we have the proper attitude. If we are in church only because we have to be here, because we are forced here by our parents or because it is expected, then God isn't pleased by our coming to church. If we do what our parents tell us to do, not because we love them and respect them, if we do what they tell us mumbling and complaining the entire time we do what they tell us then God isn't pleased even if we do what are parents have told us to do.

Yet if we come to church because we love God, because we want to obey them, then God is pleased with our actions because of the faith in Christ that is in our hearts. If we obey our parents because we know that it is the right thing to do and pleases our God in heaven, then God is pleased by our actions.

We don't need a bath to be clean. We don't need to change your clothes We *are* clean, but *not* because of what we have done. We are clean because the blood of Jesus has made us clean. Our actions are acceptable to our Father in heaven not because they are good but because Jesus makes them acceptable. Amen.