

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 and ² 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.” 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...’ 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.’”

Cleanliness is next to godliness! Or so our mothers said, especially when we didn't much care to wash up before dinner. “Cleanliness is next to godliness,” they say, and I suppose there's a benefit to the phrase. “Cleanliness is next to godliness” is one of those proverbs that sounds nice and Biblical, but it's not in the Bible. Nowhere. In fact, in our text today, Jesus shows us that outward cleanliness has nothing at all to do with godliness!

Now hang on. Isn't it a good thing to wash our hands before we eat? Isn't being clean in general a good thing? Yes, kids, you still need to wash up before dinner. But there's a difference between why we wash and why the Pharisees washed. We wash our hands to get rid of the dirt and the germs. The Pharisees washed their hands to get rid of spiritual uncleanness. They washed their hands because they thought it would cleanse them from sin in the eyes of God; we wash our hands because it's just good hygiene.

Trouble was, the Pharisees' ceremonial washing wasn't one of God's commands. You can look through the entire Bible and you'll never see God commanding anyone to wash their hands before eating. You'll see places where God commanded the Israelites to wash their clothes or their bodies, and yes, at times, their hands, but it's never in connection with eating. This washing was a human tradition that the Pharisees' ancestors had come up with. But they were treating it as more than just a tradition. They were treating it as though it *was* God's law, insisting that everyone live according to this tradition. And when Jesus and his disciples didn't, they wanted to know why they were being so *unclean*.

So Jesus schools them and the whole crowd about what makes a person clean and unclean in God's eyes. It's not the food we eat that makes us unclean, just as it's not a ceremonial washing that makes us clean. “These people honor me with their lips,” Jesus said, “but their hearts are far from me.” For out of the heart come all these evils and they make us unclean.

The Pharisees honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from him. They put on a good show, saying all the proper things, doing all the proper things, dressing properly, washing properly, eating and drinking properly, but their hearts were deserted and dead. No matter how much they washed, no matter how clean they looked, they were still unclean.

The dirty truth about us Christians is we never stop being Pharisees. We never stop being hypocrites. We're the ones who go to church, sing hymns, read the Bible, give our money and time, and pray every day. We're the ones who wake up and clean up and dress up on Sunday mornings, instead of all those unwashed masses who couldn't care less about church. We look so good, and we like that clean, sanitary feeling that comes with being good Christians men and women.

But I keep looking back at Jesus' words: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Outward appearances are easy to keep up. You just have to do and say the right things and make sure everybody sees and hears you. But all those outward observances don't make me a good person. They don't make me clean. I can sing the loudest, pray the hardest, read the most, feel the strongest, but the real question is: How is my heart? Is it turned to my God and my neighbors? And if in

my heart there are evil thoughts, lust, deceit, envy, slander, pride, even though I denounce those things in others and put on a good show—how can I be anything other than a hypocrite?

We can talk about all those people, the sinful world and all of its temptations, but the fact is, those temptations would not tempt us at all if it were not for this sinful heart within us. It's not what's outside of us that makes us sinful or unclean. Even the things out there that we think of as *sinful* aren't really sinful in and of themselves. Alcohol itself isn't sinful, and drinking isn't necessarily sinful either. Tobacco itself isn't sinful, and smoking isn't necessarily sinful either. The problem is that we feel the desire to sin. Within our hearts we desire to indulge and overindulge, and that desire manifests in outward sin.

So really, most sins we commit are sins that we *decide* to commit. It's hard to “accidentally” eat or drink too much. It's hard to “accidentally” use illegal drugs. It's hard to “accidentally” engage in illicit sex or “accidentally” view pornography. There are situations where things like that *might* happen, but they're not the norm. And even if we sin accidentally, in those accidents we are quick to feel remorse and seek forgiveness. But when we decide to sin? When we conceive evil thoughts in our unclean hearts, those thoughts give birth to sin, and sin gives birth to death.

We decide to sin. We decide to sin based on the evil within. And every decision we make makes the next decision easier. And not one of us can say otherwise. Look again at Jesus' laundry list of sins: “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.’” How many of those are my sins? How many of those stains belong to me? Maybe not all of them. But I'm on that list.

What makes us unclean? We do. We are. We aren't unclean because we sin. We sin because we're unclean. Before we ever ate or drank, before we saw our father's face or heard our mother's voice, before they ever knew who we were, sin was right there within us.

And we could never make ourselves clean. If sin comes from within, then I'm already unclean, and you can never use what's already dirty to make the dirty clean. Your hands are dirty? You can rub them against each other as much as you want. They will never get clean. I can try as hard as I might to make myself clean, following all of God's laws and all of man's traditions, and I'll be just as dirty as before.

It has to come from somewhere else. If you want to get something clean, you have to get something else dirty. You can wipe off your dirty hands on your clothes, but the grease isn't gone. Now your clothes are dirty too. You can wash your hands with soap and water, but now you've got a bunch of greasy water. If we want to be cleansed from our sin, our sin needs to go somewhere else.

So here's Jesus. He's dirty from the road, and he didn't wash his hands before he ate. But Jesus is spotless, because Jesus is sinless. He held on to all the commands of God and his heart was always turned toward his Father. And unlike the Pharisees, oh-so-clean on the outside and wouldn't dare to spend time with sinners, unlike the Pharisees the sinless Jesus got his hands dirty. He took our sin, our dirty, filthy sin, and he wore it and carried it himself. He made himself dirty so that we could be made clean. He took all our filth, and all the filth of the whole world, and all the filth of all history, and he made himself dirty and filthy and bloody. But still he was sinless, spotless. He died on the cross and they buried him in the depths of the earth. And not even all of that filth was enough, because when he rose from the dead he cleansed the whole world and everyone in it of all their sin.

And Jesus didn't just clean us up on the outside, give us a trim and a new set of clothes and call it a day. He purified us, made us pure all the way through. He changed our hearts. He made our hearts clean in the washing of our baptism. He created a new person in us that lives for God and that desires only good: purity, contentment, forgiveness, compassion, mercy, honesty, charity, humility, wisdom. Even the Pharisees could be made clean, and Jesus cleanses us of our own hypocrisy.

“Wash away all my iniquity,” King David writes, “and cleanse me from my sin. Cleanse me and I will be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” That's our prayer too, a daily defense against hypocrisy and all sin, and a daily renewal of godly cleanliness—found not in us, no, but in Jesus Christ, the one who makes us clean. Amen.