

15th Sunday after Pentecost
August 29, 2021
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Mark 7:1-23 selected verses
Clean on the Inside

Mark 7:1–8, 14-15, 21-23 (NIV84)

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.’”

Dear Friends in Christ,

You grab an apple to eat, wash it off, polish it up. It is a shiny, beautiful apple. But when you take a bite you discover that the inside is mush. It has begun to rot from the inside. That is not a nice surprise. I would rather have an apple that is a bit ugly on the outside and good on the inside. Many people also think this way about their vehicle. Yes, I like my car to be washed and vacuumed so that it looks nice on the outside. However, a great looking car with a bad engine or transmission isn’t much good. I would rather have a car with a few dents and scratches on the outside as long as the engine is good on the inside.

If this is true for fruit and cars, why is this thinking not followed with human religion? Man made religion always tries to clean up the outside of a person. It seeks to fix behaviors. It sets up new rules about what to say or not say, what to do or not do. The Pharisees were very good at being good on the outside. In Mark 7, Jesus challenges them and us that being clean on the inside is much more important.

Not By Cleaning the Outside

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?”

In the Old Testament, the priests were to wash their hands in a ceremonial way when serving at the temple. But there are no Old Testament regulations for the rest of the people to wash their hands in a ceremonial way before eating. Today, most people will wash their hands before preparing food and before eating. I think it is a great idea to wash our hands to keep from passing along germs. However, there is no law of God that tells us to wash our hands. Therefore it is not a sin to play with the dog, have dog slobber on your hands and then eat a sandwich without washing.

The Jewish teachers had made such things into sins. Picture the Ten Commandments and the law of God revealed in the Bible as a wall around his people. The Jewish teachers had built a hedge around the outside of the wall to keep people from getting close to breaking God’s revealed law. When someone went to the marketplace, they might meet people who are unclean. They might have touched a dead animal being sold in the market. They might have bumped into a Samaritan or other Gentile. They thought and taught that the sin and uncleanness of others was transferred to them. Therefore, they have to clean the outside. Wash away the possible contamination from others and I will be clean.

But you couldn’t just wash your hands in any way. There were guidelines for how much water to use and how much of your hand to wash. In this case, the Pharisees asked why the disciples didn’t wash their hands up to the wrist. Showing yourself to be a good person meant doing everything right on the outside. It was not enough to keep God’s law, you had to also keep the man made rules. It was not enough to wash your hands, you had to also wash in the correct way. Soon the man made rules were more important than God’s law. It was more important to be seen keeping with the traditions of the community than to obey the Scriptures.

They would give 10% of their garden herbs as an offering but fail to show mercy to others. They would give a gift to the Lord instead of honor to their parents. They would not enter the courtyard of Pilate in order to avoid becoming unclean during the Passover, while at the same time hating Christ and carrying out their plan to have Jesus put to death. They looked good on the outside but Jesus sees the inside.

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.”

They don’t love God. They don’t obey God’s commands. All they care about is outward appearance in society. This attitude is a trap for all of us today as well. We try to ignore the sin that is within us or we try to cover up our sinful insides with a good and respectable outside. After all, we go to church more often than other people we know. We donate a certain percentage of our income to church and other charities. We don’t use the same foul language that others at work or school use. We share with our

friends and family. Just look at how clean we look on the outside. When we get to thinking like this, let Jesus' words shock us into repentance. "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites."

Yes, Jesus calls us hypocrites when we put on a show of being good and clean while still harboring sin inside. For Jesus knows what is inside.

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.'

A beautiful woman (or handsome man) walks by and sinful thoughts enter your head, such as "Why doesn't my spouse look like that?" and maybe even thoughts of adultery. Did someone teach you to think like that? No, those wicked thoughts come from your sinful heart. You see an ad for the newest whatever. You have the previous model and it still works but you just have to have the new one and will be upset and angry until you get it. Did someone teach you to be greedy and envious? No, those sinful traits come from inside you.

It does not matter how many man made rules you keep to clean up the outside, you are still filthy on the inside. It does not matter how many of God's laws you try to keep. Our outward goodness will not clean us up where we most need it, on the inside.

Only By Cleaning the Inside

For once, the disciples seem to have gotten it right. They are not going about their lives in fear, wondering if they are using too much water or too little to wash their hands. The Scriptures tell us that they picked grain to eat on the Sabbath and were not worried that they would be stoned to death for working on the Sabbath. How were they freed from the man made laws of their people? They were near Jesus. They had been convinced that Jesus was their Savior. The hedge of man made laws only placed a burden of guilt on people. With Jesus near them, there was no reason for man made laws.

Being close to Jesus through faith gives us freedom from the guilt of sinning against the actual commandments of God. He paid for every sin with his very real body nailed to the cross and his very real blood shed there. The suffering and death of God's Son cleanses us from all sin, inside and out. This is what we need.

It is the one time washing with water and the word in Holy Baptism that we need to cleanse the inside from sin. In our daily contrition and repentance, we turn from our sins and receive Christ's inside cleansing again and again.

So if you want your children to behave better, make sure they know about Jesus. Make sure they know that Jesus loves them and forgives them and so do you. Then they can work on their behavior with a heart that is clean on the inside. If you have *evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly* showing up in your life, get close to Jesus and his word. Receive his cleansing from your sin. Receive a stronger faith through word and sacrament to resist evil thoughts, words and actions. A heart burdened with guilt and shame is in no condition to resist sin and clean up on the outside. Only a heart cleansed by the blood of Christ has the power to also work on cleaning up on the outside.

And you are clean through faith in Christ, clean on the inside.

Amen.