

Pastor Shaun Arndt

September 5, 2021

Sermon Text: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Clean

Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Mom says, ‘Did you clean up for dinner?’ The child answers, ‘yes.’ Dad responds, “Did you go in the bathroom and wash your hands?” The child scampers off and soon there is the sound of water running. Coming back the child says, ‘All clean!’ Now mom asks, ‘Did you use soap?’ After still another trip to the sink comes one more question: “did you dry your hands?”

Parents often have a different idea than their children about what is **clean**.

Themes of **clean** and **unclean** run throughout today’s Gospel lesson. Through it, Jesus teaches us what we need to be **clean** before God.

The **Pharisees and experts in the law** began the discussion after they saw Jesus’ disciples eat with **unclean (that is, unwashed) hands**. Now this isn’t talking about good hygiene or scrubbing up with soap and water.

When the **Pharisees** say **unclean**, they are not talking about dirt or germs, but ceremonial, religious **cleanness**. They are using the same vocabulary as the Bible books of Exodus and Leviticus, where God gave special laws for Old Testament Israelite worship.

Those Old Testament worship laws were meant to help direct Israel’s faith ahead toward the coming of the promised Savior. The rules about cleanliness only applied to those Old Testament believers and were to help them learn about the true cleansing the Savior would bring.

But the problem here was that the **Pharisees** were going *beyond* what the Bible had said about **clean and unclean**. Washing your hands before eating sounds good to us, but this wasn’t one of the commands God had given, even though the Pharisees acted

like it was. This ceremonial washing before eating wasn't from the Bible, but was from *the tradition of the elders*.

So the Pharisees were doing exactly what Moses forbid in our first lesson, they were **adding** to the Word of God! As Jesus said, **'They worship me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were doctrines. "You abandon God's commandment but hold to human tradition."**

But that's just part of the problem. They were also **subtracting** from God's Word, by changing the whole purpose of God's laws. They were using God's laws, turning them into the way to make yourself spiritually **clean** before God. They thought they could be saved by what they did. They even were convinced that they had done a good enough job to earn life with God.

And so Jesus had to send them 'back to the sink', and tell them they were not **clean** like they thought they were. **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.**

It turns out, all their attempts at keeping the law could not make them **clean**. Obedience to human traditions and avoiding ceremonially unclean foods could not save them.

You see, it doesn't matter how clean things 'look' to *people* on the outside if the heart on the inside is **unclean** to God.

To see this, consider how Jesus uses the word **hypocrite** in our lesson. Usually, people say you are hypocrite because of something you are *doing*. But Jesus calls the Pharisees **hypocrites** when it *looked* like they were doing the right things: **honoring (God) with their lips**, but the problem was their hearts were not in the right place: **their heart is far from me**.

Indeed, because Jesus shows us how the human heart is truly *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."**

This is the conclusion they should have drawn from all the Old Testament passages about **clean and unclean**. This is the vital truth; you and I need to believe: We are sinfully **unclean** people living in a sinfully **unclean** world.

We are indeed **unclean** – both inside and out. Consider how that list of evil deeds and attitudes in our lesson begins: **evil thoughts**.

That means it's not just robbing a bank that makes us **unclean** but so does not being satisfied with what we have and always wanting something more. Not only do **sexual sins** committed outside of God's design of marriage condemn us but so do lustful impure thoughts fueled by the indecency of TV and internet.

And **evil thoughts** lead to evil actions. While we would all agree we are to be committed to God's Word and not add or subtract from it, yet have we always shown that commitment in studying the word, hearing, learning the Bible so well we would recognize error?

And isn't a form of subtracting from the Word, when we conveniently ignore something God commands, because it's not what we wanted to hear, or because it gets in the way of what we want instead.

All this sin comes **from within** from **out of the human heart**. In God's sight, the **human heart** is far more **unclean** than the most fetid sewer or putrid roadkill. Hearts full of sin from the start of our lives led to evil and going just 'going through the motions' of **honoring** God.

If you haven't noticed it before, take a closer look at how the confession of sins we use in worship teaches this truth. Earlier we said: *I am altogether sinful from birth. In countless ways I have sinned against you and do not deserve to be called your child.* Notice it doesn't say, 'I did some bad things, so I guess I'm sinful now. No, it says I'm sinful, and that's why I've do countless sinful things.'

And that leaves us in such an awful, wretched place! It leaves us thoroughly filthy with sin inside and out and unable to do anything to get ourselves clean. It means we deserve to be left far away from God's goodness for all eternity in hell.

And dear friends, may we always see and believe it. For we need to know how **unclean** we are by nature, so that we would always and only look to the only One who make us **clean**.

It is the very same Lord who shows us just how **unclean**, who is not only able to, but truly does **clean** us from all sin – inside and out! For God the Son came in our place, born with human flesh and a human heart, but not with any of our human sinfulness! Jesus Christ alone is perfectly **clean** and **holy** in heart and life, inside and out.

There is no shortage of passages in God’s Word that tell us all Jesus did, He did to make us **clean**.

1 John 1 assures you: **the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (7,9). All means all** – the **evil thoughts** of our hearts as well as our worst shameful sins that left us feeling so **unclean**.

Jesus’ holy blood, the blood of God, freely poured out upon the cross washes us clean from every spot of sin, every stain, every sinful action, as the book of Hebrews tells us: **the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, cleanse(s) our consciences from dead works (Hebrews 9:13-14).** That includes our guilt for just ‘going through the motions.’

In the Gospel promise of baptism, God actually gives this cleansing of every sin to His people: **Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, by cleansing her with the washing of water in connection with the Word.**

Yes, by His death and resurrection applied to you personally in Baptism, the Lord has washed **clean** what no soap and water could ever go and ever touch—He has washed clean our hearts, just as He promises in 1 Peter: **baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the body but the guarantee of a good conscience before God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (3:21)**

That’s why Luther once said that we should not regard the water of baptism as mere water, but by God’s promise it is *water beautifully dyed with the precious crimson blood of our dear Savior, Christ.*

But given what Jesus says about the sinful **human heart**, don’t we need an entirely *new heart*? Yes. And God has given it to us through the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith, just as He says in Ezekiel: **I will sprinkle clean water on you... I will cleanse you from all your impurities... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you**

(36:25-26). This is the same **clean** heart David prayed about in Psalm 51: **Create in me a pure heart, O God.**

With God's creation of a new heart within, and through Jesus' cleansing forgiveness, we now get to bring forth fruits of faith in our life, following God's Word. By God's new creation in us, we can bring him godly worship, not a going through the motions but with a heart that believes we are unclean sinners whom only Jesus makes **clean.**

And with our sin washed away by Jesus, we are no longer separated from God, but have a new life with Him, just as Ephesians declares: **You who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ** (5:26).

Not just now, but for all eternity! And so the book of Revelation pictures God's believing people standing in endless joy with their Savior, free from sorrow, suffering and pain, because they are **dressed in white robes, robes washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb** (Revelation 7).

Don't try to minimize what God's Word says about our sin and don't think that anything except Jesus can ever make you clean. Not by anything we are or do, but through Christ alone, *we are clean.* Amen.

Cleanse me (Lord) and I will be clean. Amen.

We use the Apostles' Creed on page 41 in the front part of the hymnal.

If you have not had a chance yet to fill out a connection card from the seat in front of you, we ask that you would please do so and then place that completed card in one of the baskets near the doors as you exit this morning.