

August 23, 2015
Sermon The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St Peter Lutheran Church
Bowie, TX
Larry Knobloch, Pastor
Mark 7:1–13

J.J.- Jesu Juva—Help me, Jesus

Mark 7:1–13 (ESV)

¹ Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) ⁵ And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶ And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “ ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ ⁸ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” ⁹ And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban” ’ (that is, given to God)— ¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

Clean hands are important.

We expect any restaurant at least to provide the customer with a place to wash his or her hands. Most employers have strict policies about hand washing.

Hand sanitizers are popping up everywhere.

I'm forever telling my son to wash his hands, but part of that is because my mother was always telling me to wash mine. I'm one of the biggest germa-phobes out there.

Yet, really, who can tell when our hands are truly clean?

Scientists, doctors, teachers, parents, employers?

Sight, smell, or even taste?

There are actually those who argue we've so sanitized our world, including our hands, that our children are growing up less healthy than we did, more susceptible to resistant microbes.

All of this pales to unimportance, though, when we compare it to the question of a clean heart.

Some time ago, a Hollywood celebrity, as part of a high-profile visit, had the chance to spend an afternoon with the president of another country.

His main topic of conversation while visiting was about the treatment of dogs in this particular country.

Now don't get me wrong, humane treatment of animals is certainly important, but if you had one chance to speak to the president of a country known for the bad working conditions of its citizens, would that be the issue you'd focus on?

The contrast between Jesus' reception at the end of Mark 6 and His encounter with the Pharisees and scribes in our Test at the opening of chapter 7 is remarkable. The excitement about a Christ who heals all who come to Him is replaced with a concern about the ritual cleanness of His disciples' hands. *"Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. . . . And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?'"* (vv 1–2, 5).

If you had the opportunity for a private audience with Jesus, would you argue about the proper way to wash up before a meal?

It may even be that this was not a matter of the disciples not washing their hands at all, but of not washing their hands in the "proper way" to meet the Pharisees' standard.

Jesus' opponents seem to have completely lost sight of what really matters before God. The way they ask their question suggests that the root of the problem is that they've begun to put human concerns before and above what's important in God's eyes.

Our initial sympathy with the Pharisees' concern over clean hands at the table goes right down the drain when we begin to see the real problem in all its seriousness.

Did you ever have to go through an after bath inspection? I don't know what the attraction is to getting out of taking a bath, but moms usually catch on pretty quick. You might run the water and make some splashing noises and think we could fool them. But they notice when the towel isn't wet. Or they notice our hair isn't wet. And when we think we have them beat on those things, then they check the soap and notice that it is still dry.

Maybe moms know all of these tricks because they tried them when they were younger.

Either way, when we as children wanted to be declared "clean", we had better have actually used soap AND water and washed in all of the places that mom was going to check.

Back to the Text. Our Lord reminds His questioners that they still need to learn this lesson. Centuries before, through His prophet Isaiah, the Lord had tried to teach Israel to check for true cleanness by considering their hearts: *"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men"* (vv 6–7).

We may make the same mistake they were making if we miss the very important way Jesus introduces this quote from Isaiah. *"Well did the prophet Isaiah prophesy of you,"*

Right after this, Jesus will speak of the Commandments God gave through Moses and how these ancient words of God should be shaping the lives and thoughts of His hearers. The Pharisees are more concerned about whether people's hands are clean than whether their bodies have been ceremonially cleansed of disease by the words of Jesus and whether their hearts have been filled with the peace Jesus is proclaiming.

That's exactly the sort of thing that happens when we start worrying about our neighbor's hands and stop asking what's really important to God.

You've heard the expression "lip service," and you probably know what it means.

Did you know that expression was inspired by this passage in the Gospels and by the passage from Isaiah Jesus quotes here?

No one is impressed by outward professions of faith that are completely unsupported by what we do and how we do it.

It's really hard to lead a life of service to the Lord when you make big promises but never follow through. Or when you do follow through, you end up complaining all the way.

If you are serving in that way, is it really a service to the Lord, or it just lip service for your neighbor to see?

The Lord's words, both in Isaiah and in Mark, may suggest another image, when He speaks of far distant hearts. Here we might think of close lips and distant hearts.

Have you ever had the uncomfortable or even infuriating experience of someone whom you know inwardly opposes you greeting you warmly—even with a handshake, an embrace, a kiss?

We immediately think of the example of the kiss of Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Was there ever a case of greater separation between lips and hearts? But we'd better not answer too quickly. If Isaiah's words are prophesied about us, and if Jesus' warnings speak to us, we had better examine our own lips and hearts and heads and hands to see how we're doing.

How have we lost sight of what's really important? What traditions of men have we let crowd out God's Word from its proper place as the Word that demands our total obedience?

In what ways have we ceased to care about the hearts of those around us and taken, instead, to examining the cleanness of their hands?

I learned a new expression last week. It might be an old one for you, but it's new to me.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating—whether your hands are washed or not!

The wrongness of the Pharisees' approach is shown in the behavior that results. Replacing God's Word with man's, listening to human traditions that establish themselves first and God second, results in a life lived only for yourself.

Our Lord points to one of our most fundamental relationships to make this clear in the Gospel: *"He said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said,*

“Honor your father and your mother”; and, “Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.” But you say, “If a man tells his father or his mother, ‘Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban’” (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do” (vv 9–13).

When our own voices and no others guide us, when our hearts are filled with self and far from God, even those dearest to us will suffer the consequences. Instead of gratitude, honor, obedience, and love toward those who have endured pain and deprivation to give us life, we look for excuses and loopholes so that we can be free of the burden of caring for our parents.

Though the particulars of this example may be hard for us to see, Jesus’ adding *“and many such things”* shows that this is merely one example among many of what our life turned in upon itself looks like.

The contrast between images and definitions of marriage in our world today and the picture of marriage that Paul gives us in our Epistle from Ephesians 5 is just one more example. It’s a long list. Our hands may be clean, but our hearts are dirty.

The world may set standards for outward cleanness, but they can never make us clean in God’s eyes.

Jesus points out the true source of the Pharisees’ uncleanness because He wants to make them clean. This is clearly demonstrated in the casting out of the unclean spirit and the compassion

Jesus shows this to the crowds in the Gospel accounts that follow (next week's Gospel, Mk 7:14–23). Jesus draws our attention away from human traditions, which cannot save us, to focus on God's Word, which can. God's words, spoken to us and for us, expose the hidden dirt, the dirt we've been hiding in the hope no one would see.

The dirt that gets in our eyes and blinds us to the needs of those around us.

The dirt that clogs our hearts and shuts them down, the dirt that kills. But the point of all this is not so God can say, "Look, you're dirty!" Rather,

Our Lord calls us from human tradition to God's Word and His Priorities and letting His voice declare us clean, so that He can say, by His death on the cross, "Come to me, and I will make you clean."

In closing, I'd like to share with you Jesus own words from John 3:17: *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

Just as Jesus didn't share these things with the Pharisees to condemn them, but to save them...and He does so for you too.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus! Amen.

S.D.G.—Soli Deo Gloria