

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 21, 2003
Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Clean Hearts Are More Important than Clean Hands

1. Clean hands were the concern of the Pharisees
2. Clean hearts are the work of God

NIV Mark 7:1 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.'"

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The American Society of Microbiology last week issued a report on cleanliness in America. Microbiologists know that some simple, common sense habits of cleanliness—like washing our hands—can do a great deal to prevent the spread of disease. All it takes is rubbing your hands together for 10 to 15 seconds using soap and warm, running water. Unfortunately, the message hasn't gotten through to some people yet. The American Society of Microbiology knows this because during August they stationed people in the restrooms of airports in five major cities in the U.S. and in Toronto. These monitors pretended to be brushing their hair or applying make-up when in reality they were keeping track of how many people washed their hands after using the restroom. The numbers this year were about the same as in previous surveys, except in Toronto, where the SARS scare had about 95% of people washing their hands. Otherwise, in places like San Francisco, New York, and Chicago, only about two-thirds of people

washed their hands. The other one-third is contributing to the spread of everything from SARS to the common cold.

Hand washing was also on the minds of the Pharisees and teachers of the law we meet in today's Gospel lesson. After a bit of observation, they asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples wash their hands?" Their concern was not the hygiene of the disciples. People in those days didn't know what we know now about germs theory and the spread of disease. No, their concern was that the disciples were not following "the tradition of the elders," which prescribed ritual hand washing before meals and after returning from the marketplace. In his response to the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus makes it clear that **Clean Hearts are More Important than Clean Hands.**

1. Clean hands were the concern of the Pharisees

By now Jesus must have been getting used to these fault-finding expeditions that would show up from Jerusalem. Earlier they had criticized the disciples for not fasting and for working on the Sabbath day. Now their complaint was that the disciples didn't wash their hands. "*Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?*" they asked Jesus.

The first thing you have to know here is that there is not a word in the entire law of Moses instructing the people of Israel to wash their hands before eating. There are more than 600 individual commands in the Law of Moses, but nothing about washing up before eating. The rule about hand washing came from the tradition of the elders. In other words, Jewish teachers over the years began to teach that hand washing was important. They went into detail. They told you how to wash your hands (up to the wrists) and how to apply the water. In the beginning they may have been well-intentioned. Their goal was to build a sort of hedge around the law of Moses. This hedge was made of rules that went even farther than the law of Moses went. The idea was that the protective hedge of man-made rules would keep the actual Law of Moses from being broken. The Law of Moses does have a great deal to say about clean and unclean, about ritual defilement and ritual purification. But the Jewish leaders added many more rules of their own, some of which are listed here: the washing of cups, pitchers, kettles, and dining couches. You've gotta have that hedge, you know.

The Jewish leaders who devised these rules may have meant well, but their traditions were a mistake. First, they were a burden. From the time you woke up in the morning to the time you fell asleep at night, you were dogged by rules that had to do with nearly every phase of life. And then there's the fact that the line distinguishing God's laws from man's rules gradually blurred, until you had people claiming in all seriousness that the traditions of the elders were just as important as the law of God. And all of this had the effect of making religion an external thing. Piety was washing your hands and washing them the right way. It was keeping the dietary rules and abiding by the Sabbath restrictions. But too

often overlooked in all this emphasis on rule-keeping was the state of a person's heart. And the heart is God's greatest concern. By heart I mean a person's inner life, his thoughts, his feelings, his will. It's hypocrisy to give God fine-sounding words and nice-looking acts, while withholding from him my heart and mind and soul.

But as soon as we begin to talk about externalized religion, we have to recognize that this wasn't just a malady that afflicted Pharisees and teachers of the law long ago. This is a constant danger for Christians today. It's a danger for us. It's the attitude that says, "If I go to church and I say my prayers and give an offering, I've done what God requires." But have I? Remember, our God is the one who once said, **"I hate, I despise your religious feasts, I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring me choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them."** (Amos 5:21-22) Why does God say this? I thought God wanted—even commanded—religious feasts and offerings. But here's how it works with God: He does love those sacred assemblies and those burnt offerings *when they flow from a heart that loves and trusts and fears him above all things*. But if it's just going through the motions, if it's just paying lip-service to God but my heart isn't in it, well, God isn't interested in a performance. He wants our hearts. It doesn't matter if I'm a Sunday morning stalwart with a fish symbol on my car bumper and a portrait of Jesus in my living room, if my heart is full of greed, pride, selfishness, and hatred, God is not impressed. It's what's on the inside that counts with God.

So, with this background, I think we know why Jesus didn't respond to the criticism of his disciples hand-washing practices by saying, "They're not washing their hands? Well, you just let me take care of that. There'll be some changes around here pronto!" No, he took issue with it. The criticism of his disciples was coming from hypocritical men whose hearts were far removed from God. The regulations that they wanted to impose on his disciples were spiritual poison. But there was something else. Behind the Pharisees interest in handwashing was the notion that what defiles a person is touching something unclean or eating something unclean. That's backwards. What defiles us is not what goes into our mouths, but what comes out of our hearts. And only God can do something about that. Cleansing hearts is God's work.

2. Clean hearts are God's work

Jesus says here, *"Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 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.'"* This was a major break from the Pharisees "Don't touch! Don't taste!" philosophy. They viewed themselves as essentially good. They assumed that their disposition was good by nature, that they had the power to choose to do good. So their main concern was to keep unclean things and unclean people from contaminating them. That accounted for a lot of their rules.

Jesus had a different view. He said the real problem is not touching or eating something that defiles us. The real problem is that our hearts are naturally defiled. He says, *“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.’”* It’s plain that for Jesus, the heart isn’t the God-friendly place that the Pharisees thought it was. Far from it. The heart of sinful man is a breeding ground for every kind of sin. Want a second opinion? St. Paul says, **“The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.”** (Rom. 8:7) A third opinion? It says in Ecclesiastes, **“The hearts of men are full of evil.”** (Eccl. 9:3) Why is there so much crime? Why do people lie and murder and cheat and give themselves over to all kinds of impurity? More to the point, why am I so self-centered, so arrogant, so cold to the needs of others, so critical, so impatient, and so jealous? In every case, it’s the heart. The problem is there in the center and source of our inner lives. We have “heart problems,” the kind of heart problems that result in eternal death.

But thank God this condition of ours is not necessarily terminal. God prescribes something. He says, “Repent!” It says in the Bible, **“Whoever conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”** (Prov. 28:13) It’s no use in resisting Jesus’ diagnosis of our heart. In our heart we know it’s true. That’s why the apostle John says, **“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all righteousness.”** (1 John 1:8-9) That purifying refers to God applying the righteousness and holiness of Jesus to us. Through faith in Jesus our sins have been removed and we have in its place pure hearts. I think of King David, going through the motions for almost a year, pretending that nothing was wrong, even as Bathsheba’s pregnancy testified to his unfaithfulness and his conscience crushed him for conspiring to kill her husband. But then came repentance. David said, **“I have sinned against the LORD.”** And the assurance of God’s grace came from the lips of the prophet, **“The LORD has put away your sin.”** The LORD did what David requested and created in him a pure heart—by the power of his gracious forgiveness. God has done the same for us. Through faith in Jesus we have washed our robes and made them clean in the blood of the Lamb.

The good folks at the American Society of Microbiology are no doubt onto something. We could do a lot to halt the spread of disease if we were just a little more fastidious. The solution is ten to fifteen seconds of soap and warm, running water. There’s a solution to the greater problem, too—the problem of unclean hearts that lead to all manner of unclean thoughts and words and actions. But there, too, there’s a solution: Repentance. That is, confess the sin and trust in Jesus for forgiveness. In him, our hearts are cleansed to perfect purity. Amen.