

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 saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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.) 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?” 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. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “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.’” 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.’”

If you asked Jesus, “Where did you find the world’s most spiritually messed up people?” I know exactly what he’d say. I hesitate to tell you ‘cause it’s a pretty offensive thing to say here. So I’m going to lay a little groundwork before I say it. I have a red-letter Bible. A red-letter Bible is a Bible that puts Jesus quotes in red. I like red-letter Bibles ‘cause they make Jesus’ words jump out. Try an interesting exercise when you go home. Read only the red-letter parts of Mark. Then ask yourself the question that I started with and you’ll find out it’s a no-brainer. “Jesus, where did you find the world’s most spiritually messed up people?” Jesus would say, “I found them coming out of churches.”

That’s thought provoking, isn’t it? The most messed up people - spiritually speaking - were found coming out of churches. That seems too bizarre, doesn’t it? They should have known God’s teachings. They should have internalized them, believed them, and acted on them. They really should have known better. That was the problem. They knew better. At least, they thought they did.

They thought they knew better about hand washing. That’s right. They tangled with Jesus over hand washing. What a bunch of know-it-alls! The religious experts and religious zealots, the Pharisees, walked and walked and walked all the way from Jerusalem to tangle with Jesus over hand washing.

Here's what happened. The disciples must have been getting into dinner just as these people showed up to see Jesus. They happen to observe that Jesus hadn't trained his disciples to wash their hands in just the prescribed way. Please don't be confused. Maybe you're like me and you've got your mom in your head, "Wash your hands before dinner. You don't want to get sick." These guys aren't concerned about the hygiene of the disciples. The disciples could very well have washed their hands. The problem was that they didn't complete the ritualistic, religious washing before dinner. They didn't create a fist with one hand rub water on it and then repeat with the other hand. They weren't following "the rules."

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?" (v. 5) This is one of those cases in the Bible where you really don't need a dramatic reading to know the tone that went into the question. This was criticism. This was a question with an edge. This was them calling Jesus onto the carpet for not doing a better job teaching his disciples how to be spiritually clean. See now we're getting into the heads of these guys. Their issue wasn't about hand washing - not really. It was about being clean before God or unclean - in with God or on the outs.

I think I've pointed out to you before what Jesus so often does with questions. He doesn't answer the question. He couldn't - if he was going to be able to help them he couldn't play to their know-it-all question. So there's no "here's why they didn't complete the ritualistic washing." Instead, he comes out swinging like a prizefighter. **"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. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." (v. 6-8)** There is no verse in the Bible prescribing the ultimate hand washing routine. It doesn't exist. These guys made up the routine; commanded other people to do it; and said, "This is how you can be clean before God." Think about how ridiculous this is. It'd be like me saying that you had to perform the "holy skip" into church in order for you to be clean before God. Here's how you do it. (Demonstration) Now everyone has to do it on the way into church if you want to be clean. The "holy skip" wouldn't do you a lick of good. It's a man made rule. It's empty worship.

It sounds so ridiculous, doesn't it? But it can still happen that people trust a habit or ritual for cleanliness instead of Jesus. Every fall I ask all our catechism kids how they know if they're clean before God (I phrase it differently, but it's the same thought.). Every year more than one says, "I go to church." Every single year. That always bugs me. Do the kids mean that they connect to Jesus and his forgiveness at church? Is that what they mean? Or do they have the idea that showing up at a building at the right time, and then standing up and sitting down sitting down when

the pastor tells them to is really the end-all-be-all of faith? I'm not sure. I have the same question with adults. I bump into members who haven't been to church in a while. Often they end up saying, "Pastor, I'll be in church soon." Again, is that because that's where people connect to Jesus or is it because people are more worried about church attendance than a relationship with Jesus? The bottom line is that if we think our perfect church attendance, or perfect prayer routine, or whatever religious ritual you have makes you clean than that's no better a thought than, "I will pour water over my fist, scrub, and repeat on my other fist. And voila! Now I'm clean!"

Want to know why? The dirt runs too deep. Watch how Jesus begins to get at that reality. **"Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "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.'" (v. 14-15)** Nothing outside of a man - not what you touch or walk in or eat - is going to spoil you before God. That was a completely radical thought for these guys for whom so much of what they ate and drank, touched and didn't touch was regulated. Jesus comes along and says, "You've got it all backward. You think hand washing will make you clean? You think other habits and rituals will do the trick? Good luck, guys. You don't become unclean by what you can see, measure, and perform, or fail to perform. You get dirty from the unseen, real core of who you are, your soul.

Listen to what Jesus says (It's hard to hear!): **"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' 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.'" (v. 20-23)** From within. Out of the heart. From the core. From the soul comes all kinds of evil. They make a person unclean before God. Now that's uncomfortable. Seriously uncomfortable. I climbed a tree once. At least, I tried to. The branches broke under my weight. It was rotten at the core. Rotten at the core. That's the key thought here.

There is no denying the truth about humanity. How many people have been murdered in cold blood? How many women have been raped? How could we produce a Hitler and a Stalin both in the last 100 years? It's easy to see evil in others. You know what's more difficult? Seeing it in yourself. Imagine if I were to announce, "There's a murderer among us." How would we react? Our first thought would be to look around and ask, "Who dunnit?" But it really shouldn't be. We should look at the floor and think, "I did. I did in my heart." That kind of self-knowledge is frightening. We're honestly not great at seeing our own inner evil. Sometimes it's because it's never been pointed out. Sometimes it's willful repression. I read an interesting book last week that made this comment, "You know the kinds of things you don't like in others? You don't like those kinds of things in others because that's exactly what you don't like about yourself (but won't

admit).” That comment begins to get at our sad reality. It’s what’s inside us that makes us unclean. You know what’s even more devastating? There’s no amount of hand washing that can clean up that kind of dirt.

You may be surprised to know that that is the end of Jesus’ narrative. It had to be. The Christian rule of thumb that Jesus gave us is this: Don’t throw pearls to pigs. The people Jesus was dealing with were spiritual pigs. They hated him. But you do hand pearls to saints. That’s you. The pearls come quick in Mark. In the rest of chapter seven Jesus tosses out a demon and makes a blind man see. In chapter eight he says, “I’ve got to suffer, die, and rise on the third day.” You see what Jesus did, don’t you? Jesus stopped talking about the dirt on our souls. For him, there wasn’t anymore talking to do on that issue. There was only acting for you. And act he did. He was the runaway salvation train. Nothing was going to stop our Savior. He was going to roll over blindness, demons, every obstacle and roll into an epic collision with sin and death with him standing at the end of it all.

That’s the thing. We need Jesus to act for us. Hand washing won’t work. Holy skipping won’t either. Not even weekly attendance at a church service is going to do it. None of that will cleanse our souls from dirt. All of that is barking up the wrong tree. What’s the right tree? We spent weeks and weeks reading through John chapter six in our last worship services. It was early in the chapter when Jesus was asked a key question. Remember I told you earlier that Jesus often doesn’t answer questions because the answer is not what people needed to hear. That wasn’t the case this time. They asked, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” They really wanted to know, “Jesus, how do we get right with God? Jesus, what makes us clean?” Great question with an answer that everyone needs to hear. So Jesus answers it. **“The work of God is to believe in the one he has sent.” (John 6:29)** There it is. Believe in Jesus. Trust he makes you right with God. Know that he makes your soul clean.

How do we know that Jesus makes us clean? There’s a verse from the book of Revelation that makes my head spin. It says, **“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:14)** Let’s talk about those robes first. The robes aren’t just a papering over of the soul dirt inside. They’re representing the new inner reality of the saints. They’re washed. They’re cleaned. Again, this is not whitewashing a rotten core. It’s decorating the real truth. These people are clean. Absolutely clean.

But you may argue: “How can that be? Didn’t they have dirty souls too?” They don’t anymore. You don’t either. The Lamb of God bled for us on the altar of his cross. That blood is the detergent that makes us clean. It’s the ultimate Tide that takes the dirt right off our souls. It makes them clean and bright and new. Interesting detergent, isn’t it? It’s the only blood I know of that cleans anything let alone the human soul. And yet it does! Our souls are white, pure, and dirt-free. They’ve been made clean in the blood of the Lamb.

I don't know if you noticed it or not, but when I started this sermon I only used the past tense. The question was: Jesus, where *did* you find the world's most messed up people? That was intentional. That's because I don't believe the people in this church are heading home trusting their church attendance, holy skipping, or a hand washing ritual to make them clean. The dirt lies lodged too deeply - in the human soul - for those things to clean us. The detergent needs to be much more powerful. You're clean now in Jesus' blood. Totally, completely, to the level of a saint clean. True story. Change the question with me. If you asked Jesus, where do you find the world cleanest people? I know what he'd say. He'd say, "Right here!" Amen.