

“A Question of Holiness Before God”

Mark 7:14-23

Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 29, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

Rev. Charles Westby, Pastor

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In Mark chapter 7, Jesus is in a debate with the scribes and Pharisees about holiness before God. These scribes and Pharisees were heavy hitters from Jerusalem. They were the enforcers of the “tradition of the elders” of the people of Israel, as it was called. Our passage today is a continuation of the debate.

The debate was about how we are holy before God. This issue comes into the conversation with the word defile. In verse 15 Jesus says, “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” The word in Greek being translated with the English word “defile” could also be translated with the English word “profane.” The word profane seems to be more clearly the opposite of the word “holy.” So we could say this: “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can make that person unholy before God. The things that come out of a person are what make that person unholy before God.”

The Scribes and the Pharisees were saying that if people just follow the tradition of the elders, then they will be holy before God. What kinds of things were they talking about?

They were talking about eating with washed hands. They were criticizing Jesus because they observed that His disciples did not wash their hands first before eating.

This handwashing doesn’t have anything to do with hygiene. It’s not like when Mom says, “Go wash your hands.” It has to do with ritual or ceremonial washings that were made up by men in the tradition of the elders. These things were not commanded in the word of God, and that is at the heart of the issue: “Teaching as doctrine the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7). These things seem religious and oh so spiritual. If a person eats without having done the ritual washing according to the tradition, then that person is unholy. If the person does that, then they are holy.

There were also sabbath regulations, like hundreds of them. How about this one. You could only walk so many paces on the Sabbath. If you stayed within those number of paces, you were holy before God. If you walked more than the prescribed number of paces, you were unholy before God.

Or how about this one. If you carried a mat or something sort of like a cushion to go under your sleeping bag when you are camping, if you carried that kind of thing on the Sabbath, you were unholy. If you refrained from carrying it, you were holy.

The reason I bring that up is because Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath who was unable to walk. He laid on such a mat next to a pool of water that was supposed to have healing power for 38 years (John 5:1-5). You can read about this story at the beginning of John chapter 5. Jesus told the man to stand up, pick up his mat, and walk. The man did so. He walked, and picked up his mat (John 5:6-9). The Pharisees saw that man carrying his mat and were horrified. He was breaking the sabbath regulation. The man told them that the man who told him to get up and walk said it would be alright for him to carry his mat (John 5:10-12). I mean really, he told me to get up and walk. I had not been able to do that for 38 years.

There were dietary laws as to what a person may eat or not. If you refrain from eating certain foods, you are holy. If you eat certain foods, you are unholy. Some of these actually are

in the Law of Moses. Jesus was really stirring up trouble because He was taking charge not only of the traditions of the elders, but of the law of Moses, because He purified all foods. What kind of authority did He think He had? Ah yes, there is a most important question.

Jesus's argument is irresistible. His logic is beyond refutation. He speaks in terms of food, but it could also apply to all these other external regulations. Food is outside a person, whether it is beef, or pork, an oyster, or a carrot. When a person eats it, what happens? It goes into the stomach, and then into the digestive track, and then gets expelled. Where does it not go into? It does not go into the heart.

By heart here we are not talking about that organ in our bodies that pumps blood. We are talking about the inner human being. We are talking about the seat and source of our thoughts, our desires, our will, what we are passionate about. It is where our beliefs and convictions lie. It is the source of what we say. It is the source of what we do.

Whether one eats beef, or pork, or a carrot, such eating cannot effect one's heart. It just simply has to do with the nourishment of the body. There is nothing about such eating that can make a person holy or unholy before God.

But what comes out of the heart is a much different matter. This is because what comes out of the heart can be sin before God and sin makes us unholy. What comes out of the heart also shows what the heart is like, whether it is good or corrupt. And this is what God is ultimately concerned about in terms of holiness in His presence. Sin is not holy in His presence.

We understand sin here as defined by God's commandments; what God says is true, just, right, and good.

What comes out of the heart as sin makes the heart unholy, because it is the heart that produced it. The fruit of the tree shows what kind of a tree one is dealing with.

When Jesus started His teaching on how a person is defiled before God, He turned to the crowd. He said, "Hey you all. Listen up. Open your ears and your hearts, and pay attention, so you can get this, so you can understand."

He did this because humans have a particular tendency. It is the tendency to think that they are doing really well before God when they are doing or not doing the kinds of things that have no bearing on making us holy or unholy. And at the same time, humans have the tendency to do the kinds of things that do make them unholy before God.

For example, let's say that a person followed the tradition of the elders and made sure they did not walk more than the required number of steps on the sabbath. Yet, they harbor malice and ill will in their hearts toward someone. Or let's say they are engaged in sexual immorality according to God's standards. Or let's say they steal something that is within their reach within the number of steps allowed. Or let's say they are able to slander their neighbor while staying within the required number of steps.

They think they are holy before God because they didn't take too many steps. But they are not. They are unholy before God because they have sinned against the commandments, which are not doctrines of men.

This also works the other way. Let's say there is the person who says, "Hey I am free from this stupid sabbath regulation." And they walk more than the prescribed number of steps. But as they are doing that, they harbor ill will, they steal, they engage in sexual immorality, they slander their neighbor, and so they are in violation of the commandments. They may regard themselves as free from the commandment of men, but they have still violated the commandments of God. They are not free.

But now we need to get down to this. A few of the most important verses in the Bible

regarding our relationship to God as well as understanding ourselves and human nature are what Jesus says at the end of our passage. He says, “[F]rom within, out of the heart of a person, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they make a person unholy before God” (Mark 7:21-23).

These words of Jesus are like a mirror held up in front of the natural human heart. It shows us what natural human nature is like. The human heart that we are born with is deeply corrupted by sin. When we see ourselves doing anyone of these things, we see the corruption of human nature. We all have it. Jesus is teaching us the standing of our natural human nature under the law. And He is leaving us no wiggle room. It is like He is saying to the Scribes and Pharisees: “You think you are doing well before God by keeping all your man made traditions. Yet, you see all of these things that are contrary to God’s commandments that you do. These things come out of the heart, and no matter how much you think you are holy in keeping the traditions that you have made up, these things make you unholy before God.”

This is really important. It is the flip side, the negative side of justification by grace before God. It is the first step of healing. In the very face of the negative side of justification, God brings in the positive side. Because Jesus showing us the mirror forces the question: Then just how are we holy before God? Jesus gives the diagnosis like a good doctor, so He can give us the cure.

Here is the cure. Our holiness before God, by which He accepts us is His action in Christ out of grace and love for us. This action is the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ. God sets Jesus Himself against the unholiness of our natural hearts. This is Jesus in His person as Son of God; Jesus in His sinless life, that is, Jesus Himself as our righteousness (Jer. 23:6); Jesus in His atoning death, where He bore God’s punishment against our unholiness; Jesus in His resurrection from the dead, which is our justification (Romans 4:25); Jesus as God’s gift to us, given out of profound love (John 3:16). God’s love is profound because it is given to us in spite of the fact that our natural hearts are corrupted by sin (Romans 5:8). So we can rely on His love.

And there is more of God’s action toward us in grace and profound love in Jesus. Jesus speaks forgiveness to us in the Gospel, in absolution. Jesus applies forgiveness to us and God turning to us His grace in the washing of water with the word (Ephesians 5:26; 1 Corinthians 6:11), that is, Holy Baptism, and the Holy Supper of our Lord’s body and blood. God’s action for us in Jesus is not complete without the way His merits are delivered to us.

You are holy before God where you are forgiven for Jesus’s sake and trust the forgiveness Jesus has won and which is delivered to us here.

And then God kindles within your hearts new thinking, new desires, new willing, to want to do what is good and right, according to His word, for God’s honor, for the sake of our neighbor. This is a spiritual battle in which you are engaged. We need to put on the full armor of God for this battle as the Apostle says in Ephesians 6.

We give thanks to Jesus here for two reasons. The first is for telling us the truth about what makes us unholy before God. We need the diagnosis. The second, is for being the cure Himself and for delivering it to us in His things. And this is really good, for if Jesus Himself is the cure in connection with His way of delivering it to us, then the cure is utterly reliable. And boy how we need that assurance. As you take refuge in Jesus, that is, believe that He is Your forgiveness before God, you are holy to God, God’s precious possession, and He hears you and keeps you for Himself forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.