

TEXT: Mark 7:1-4a, 5-8, 14, 15, 21-23

^{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.) 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.’ ”

Prayer of the Day:

O Lord Jesus Christ, preserve the congregation of believers with your never-failing mercy. Help us avoid whatever is wicked and harmful, and guide us in the way that leads to our salvation; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. Your words became a joy to me, and the delight of my heart. Alleluia. (Hebrews 4:12)

Sermon Text:

He sat across the table trying to wrap his brain around everything he had just heard. How was this possible? He exercised regularly, ate all the right foods, did all the right things and still a rare heart condition had left him weak, sick, apparently at death’s door. It’s hard to detect the doctor had told him but he was fortunate. Now that they knew the problem there were treatments, things they could try to prolong life. If he was lucky, he might even regain the strength that had seemingly disappeared from him. Now more than ever the truth seemed so vivid and important: **A HEALTHY HEART MATTERS!**

An even more insidious issue sat before Jesus in our lesson today. When it came to the Pharisees, everything looked good. They lived in strict compliance to the laws of God, even attempted to strengthen them with the traditions of their particular sect within Judaism. Among men they seemed as spiritually healthy as they came, but there was a massive problem. They had given themselves over to the false teaching of work righteousness. It meant that while they looked good on the outside, their hearts were diseased and far from the truth of God’s Holy Word. The Pharisees had a heart problem.

Faith is an interesting thing. It is difficult to quantify. While there are outward signs of the inward realities, they can be mimicked, copied. Ultimately, faith is something that only God can see. It’s the reason the Lord told Samuel, “*For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.* (1 Samuel 16:7)”

The Pharisees wanted to know why Jesus didn't make His disciples adhere to the rules of their tradition. They hadn't washed their hands before eating. It wasn't so much personal hygiene that was the concern here either. This was more of a ceremonial cleansing a man-made law that they required of those who would call themselves clean.

Jesus, God in the flesh, sees past the outward realities and knows what's really going on. The real question here is how can these men be followers of God when they don't do all the things the Pharisees figured should be done. Jesus *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.'*" While they may have looked good on the outside, their worship was empty, a vain show of a righteousness that completely illuded them. Because they couldn't see their own hopelessness, they imagined that they could live in such a way that God would prize them over others and ultimately reward them with an eternity in heaven. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

"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.'" Outward actions will never make a man clean or unclean. Faith must accompany our work. Our works must flow from an understanding of who we really are, sinful human beings in need of a Savior. That understanding must be coupled with the knowledge of everything our God has done for us. Jesus' life, death and resurrection fuel our thankfulness. Works done without this knowledge are ultimately hollow, they may look good, but they are an empty shell because they lack a heart that is overcome with appreciation for Jesus.

I wonder how many truly understand this, even today. I have never tried it but I'm told if you perform a random survey on the street asking the simple question of are you going to heaven most will respond with uncertainty. I hope so. I think I'm generally a pretty good person. I hope I've done enough. They have fallen into the same trap of the Pharisees. There is a heart problem in the answers given.

Are we much better? Now I hope and pray that the years we spend in religious training, in Sunday School, in our parochial school systems, in Bible class and in worship have taught us that we can be certain in the answer that is given, but I wonder how often Satan doesn't use even these blessings to lure us into a false hope. We fall for the false hope that these things, these actions somehow make us better than others. We begin to look down our noses at others whose attendance is less than our own. As if our life choices have earned us a better standing before God than the choices others have made. We pretend to honor God with our lips, with our lives but our hearts, well they have been overcome by the very same disease so prevalent in others.

The truth is a far different thing. Why do we go to church? Why do we spend time in study and in worship, wrapped in the truths of God's Word, relishing his sacraments? May it never be because we think it makes us better than our neighbor. May we never view them as our work rendered to our God. Out of our hearts come the same wicked and depraved acts of others far less spiritual than ourselves. Instead heed the words Jesus speaks today. For in them, is the only answer to the heart problem we all face.

Why does Jesus encourage us to listen to Him? Why should time spent with Jesus be more important than the time we spend keeping our bodies healthy? Why are the sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper such treasures in the lives of God's people? The answer is not because

these are our works rendered to God but the exact opposite. It is because they are God's Work given to us.

In His Word, God works within us. Yes, with His law which cuts like a scalpel to root out the sin which lurks within us but more importantly with His Gospel which refocuses our hearts and minds on the work that is already accomplished for us. Here we see the one who has fulfilled God's Law in our place. In the Word we are taken to Calvary's cross that we might see the full and complete payment for all our sin, spilt in the precious blood of the Lamb of God, our Savior, Jesus. There we enter the empty tomb and see through eyes of faith the reality that the victory has been won and given to us life, salvation, forgiveness is ours. Not in our actions but in His. In the waters of Baptism, God sends His Spirit into sin ravaged hearts to grant that faith which clings to Christ in all we think and say and do. In our regular remembrance of it, the New Man, faith arises anew to live before God in righteousness and holiness. In the Lord's Holy Supper, the very body and blood which cured us from the sickness of sin is given to us, in with and under the bread and the wine miraculously offering all that Body and Blood have secured for us: forgiveness of every sin, a new life to be lived for God not in some vain attempt to please Him but in thanksgiving for all God has done for us, salvation – the sure and certain hope with anchors our soul in the assaults of this life knowing that perfection, glory, heaven is already ours not by work, at least not ours or it would all crumble into uncertainty, rather by God that it might be sure, certain, secure.

Focused on these truths the heart begins to pump the blood, the faith which changes our lives from the inside out. No longer do we seek to render the sin which defiles us and leaves us unclean but faith desires to live for God, to follow His will, to do the work which He has placed before us. I will want to be the best spiritual example that I can be for my children, that I might set before them the same life-giving word which has been so present in my life. I will want to follow God's will not because I fear some holy abacus in heaven tallying my work to earn heaven but because this is good for me, beneficial as I fight against the sin that still rages within. I will even let go of the prizes of the world around me seeing, money, health, talent, strength as opportunities to serve God and to love my neighbor that my walk with Him might only grow closer. Why not be as close to the one who saves me as I could possibly be? These are the truths which first change my heart and then change my life forever. Perhaps Aseph said it best *"Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Psalm 73:25-26"* Again, it's God's work and none of my own and in Him our hearts are secure.

Today, as Jesus chastises the Pharisees who are all caught up in their works, there is a lesson for us all. When it comes to our walk with God, He desires that we grow ever closer to Him. But such a walk is not a matter of our work. It's a matter of the heart and so dear friends, **A HEALTHY HEART MATTERS! GOD SEES UNCLEAN HEARTS, REGARDLESS OF HOW GOOD THE ACTION. ONLY GOD CAN CLEAN OUR FILTHY HEARTS AND DEVOTE THEM TO HIM.** Let's Pray ... *Renew me, O eternal Light, And let my heart and soul be bright, Illumined with the light of grace That issues from your holy face. Create in me a new heart, Lord, That gladly I obey your Word. Oh, let your will be my desire And with new life my soul inspire.* Renew Me, O Eternal Light (#471:1,3)