

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 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.'"

Jesus makes the unclean clean.

Labor Day weekend is often associated with the allure of, at least, one more, big outdoor cookout. It is one of those common memories, those common sights and signs of Labor Day as a group comes together to be recharged as they enjoy the company of friends in the beauty of the outdoors. As such groups come together to relax quite often this means digging into a paper plate piled to the edge with tasty food. Eating outdoors, enjoying a picnic, eating in campout or cookout setting, on Labor Day weekend has a certain end of the summer charm to it, but it does also present some challenges, especially in the field of cleanliness. Trying to hold a flimsy paper plate in one hand while balancing a beverage in the other all the while sitting in a collapsible chair can easily lead to some messy encounters. Sitting at a picnic table as the outside elements of wind and dirt and grass add to the degree of difficulty of keeping yourself clean while you try to shovel an already sloppy spoonful of baked beans into your mouth or gnaw on a piece of watermelon that is dripping its sticky juice and it is near impossible to finish without a stain on your shirt or a mess on your face or hands. Needless to say, napkins, paper towels, wet-wipes, and other cleaning provisions are necessity when we are talking about getting cleaned up during or after such a cookout.

It is a difficult task to stay spotless during such an outdoor adventure but our attention today is directed to something that is not just *nearly impossible* for us to do, this task type of task that we will consider would be *completely impossible*: making ourselves clean spiritually. In our lesson for today Jesus reveals that it is not what is on the outside that

makes us unclean. It's not some stain on our shirt or the food that we sloppily eat that he is primarily concerned about, but he is truly concerned about the horrible mess that's inside us, our sinful hearts. But in his grace, Jesus makes the unclean clean.

As Jesus is preaching and teaching in the northern part of Israel near the Sea of Galilee, some Pharisees and even some teachers of the law - who presumably came all the way up from Jerusalem to confront Jesus - were a bit agitated that Jesus and his disciples were not conforming to their standards of cleanliness. These Pharisees and their pals seemed to have developed their own standards of spiritual cleanliness. We are told that these Pharisees were up in arms over the fact that some of Jesus' disciples had not followed a proper ceremonial washing ritual before they ate. The Pharisees were not so concerned about physical cleanliness and sanitary safeguards, but this was important only because of the standard they had established and agreed upon for spiritual cleanliness. They figured that if they did all these outward things, if they made it look like they followed all of God's commands, the traditions of the elders, and also a few pious practices of their own they would certainly be viewed as clean by their neighbors and their God. But it turns out that they were way off. They were missing the point of God's law and his Word all together and instead they were holding on to the traditions of the elders more than the Words of God. These pious pretenders insisted that Jesus' disciples were to follow the standards that had been set by other righteous looking men, and so Jesus reminded them of this ever so crucial piece of spiritual instruction: It is not what is outside a man that makes him unclean in the eyes of God, because a human being's wicked heart and the sin that pumps forth from such a corrupted heart makes a person unclean. ***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.'***"

Human beings are sinful, or unclean, by nature, and yet God did not discard us or toss us aside like a piece of trash, but rather he came into this world to cleanse and to save us. He came to do the dirty work of salvation that we could not do. We could never scrub enough, never do enough good things to scrub away the sin in our lives and in our hearts. Sinful thoughts crop up, sinful actions aren't far behind, and it is all constantly being produced and pumped into our lives from our sinful hearts. We could find ways to appear outwardly good and pious, but we could never truly keep up with or stop our sinful thoughts, and words, and actions. The sins that we hide from others or cover up with our sweet smelling words and deeds we could never truly clean up or keep hidden from God no matter how hard we tried. And so God in his mercy came to us, with the cleansing agent of his Son. Our God came down from the impeccable crystal throne room in the immaculate glory of heaven, and he descended to our world to walk in the dirt and the dust. And it was not only the ground that he walked on that was so foreign and such a filthy contrast to his pristine purity, but he was severely contrasted by those he walked among. He came into a world that was the complete opposite of him. He was the holy, the spotless Lamb of God. The sinless Son of God, pure and holy came to a world that was so broken by sin that every single person produces horrible emissions of sin at a staggering rate and in various forms of thought, word, and deed.

As Jesus walked this earth he had to watch as family members, his own earthly mother and father, friends, disciples, neighbors and acquaintances sinned constantly. He had to watch as some took an obvious descent into the depths of moral depravity. He had to watch

as men next to him leered and gawked at women. He had to listen as sinful thoughts turned to lewd, and crude, and hurtful words. He watched and witnessed the very sins that he came to pay for as evil thoughts brought forth dirty, cruel, and unsightly actions. He walked through the busy marketplaces and the quiet villages, and he saw men and women, people of all ages, showing their sad evidence of their sinfulness: ***greed and theft, adultery, infidelity, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.*** The list seems to come from his lips with such awful ease. He didn't have to think for long to consider the filth and the immorality that was mass produced by this sinful world in which he was now living. The sinless son of God, the one who laid the foundations of the world in all its perfection and watched as man broke his perfection, now watched in person, with human eyes, that surely were brought to tears because of the evil that seeped and oozed and poured out of those that he created. ²¹ ***For from within, out of men's hearts, come {all sorts of sins}...*** ²³ ***All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'***"

As he walked through this world, as he daily witnessed the lives of sinners, he had to watch as mankind, the crown of his creation, that he had created as perfect now wallowed in their sinfulness. And he also had to stomach the fact that many times these same people liked to argue about whose pile of filth was the cleanest. The truly sinless one had to listen as a group of unclean sinners had the audacity to criticize those who in their opinion were not clean enough.

What do you think that Jesus would say in our world today? When recent scandals have exposed the names and personal information of people, some of them well known Christians, who paid a website to help them find willing partners to engage in extra-marital affairs; how do you think Jesus would react? How do you think Jesus would react when recent expose's detail the wrong doings of company executives and noted celebrity figures who lie and deceive to cover up their greed, and other unsightly desires, that have plunged them into unspeakable actions? When the dirty deeds of world leaders, people next door, and even well-known and respected people in the church are exposed on a regular basis in this world of 24 hour global news, would Jesus be shocked? The immorality, the greed, the wickedness, the violence, the sexual sins, the lewdness, the arrogance, the folly; what do you think Jesus would say about our world today? Would he be shocked? Deeply saddened yes, but hardly shocked. The heart of mankind is still filled with this same evil. This is what sinful man is capable of, has always been capable of, since the fall into sin: unspeakable evil. And it is not something that some of us are immune to, but this is what lies inside each one of us. We have sinful hearts.

God's word serves as that mirror that makes this sad reality clear. God's law, a quick thumbing through of the 10 commandments makes it clear that we too are so dreadfully sinful. We are not even close to perfect. Not a single one of us has a righteous leg to stand on before an all holy God. We fall far short of the glory of God and deserve punishment. And yet there is this sinful pride in us that blinds us to our sinfulness because we like so much to make it all relative. There is this perspective that we gravitate to and love to embrace, that I am better than the next guy, that at least I am not as filthy as her or them. Whenever we do this, and make no mistake about it, we do this, we conveniently forget about our filthy, messy, inherent sinfulness that starts deep in our own sin-stained hearts too.

We may even go out of our way to find favorable comparisons to make ourselves feel better. We grab these news reports and we look at the lives of these strangers and instead of being led to personal repentance at the public evidence of the sin that is privately within us all; instead of personal repentance, we go out of our way to make ourselves appear more righteous. *At least I'm not like that guy on the news.* That is certainly not the standard that our Savior wants us to have. And so when that doesn't work for us anymore we try on a different argument. *Well, at least I haven't done what that person next door has done! Well, I go to church regularly, and I when I go, I take the time to dress up more properly than so and so!* Again, that's not the standard by which he wishes us to view his law.

Our Savior urges us to put away this outward self-righteous nonsense, the "at least I am better than so and so" garbage and instead he wants us all to repent. He wants us to recognize how sinful we are so that we might marvel all the more not in man-made traditions or standards, or my ability to follow the law with some pitiful percentage, but I am to marvel in his grace. That same greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly, is in here, it's in my heart and your heart too, but by God's grace alone in Christ you and I have been cleansed. Far better than a wet-wipe at a picnic that takes away some small outward stain, God has cleansed and forgiven and blotted out and wiped away that pile of filth that is my sin. Through the blood of Jesus he has paid for every sin, wiped them all away. He has taken away my grubby sin-stained garments that I soil each day and he has given me a spotless robe of righteousness to wear in the courts of his kingdom forever. Through faith in his powerful crimson blood that was shed for my sin I am made whiter than snow.

No, we are not going to suddenly stop sinning all together, but God assures you and me that he has forgiven each and every sin and this grace of God in Christ Jesus renews us and enables us and motivates us and compels us and strengthens us to live for him. We come to God's house on this Labor Day weekend to be refreshed to fight against temptation, to be renewed in our grateful work of living for our God in thankful obedience. No matter what you have done, no matter what personal sins have stained your lives and dirtied your conscience or soiled your reputation, the LORD Jesus has forgiven that sin. Be renewed and be strengthened to go live for him in the freedom of this forgiveness. As God's Word tells us in **1 John 1:8,9.** ***⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*** The blood of Jesus purifies us from every sin. And Christ love compels us to live for him. **¹⁵And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. - 2 Corinthians 5:15.**

And so we gather together inside this place and we rejoice in his grace and we are refreshed by the good news of his work of complete salvation. And we gladly labor for him, following his will not so that we look better than the next guy, but we gladly live our lives in obedience and awe-filled thankfulness. Let us not look to measure and weigh the sins of others, but let us consider the height and depth and breadth of the love of our God, that he would cleanse you and me personally and take away each and every one of our sins. Jesus has made the unclean clean. Amen.