

This morning, we are in the eighth week of a sermon series I am calling “Savior and Lord,” looking at what it means to relate to Jesus as both Savior – the one who died for our sins to give us eternal life – and Lord – the one who we follow and emulate. We are working our way through Mark’s gospel in this series. Mark was Peter’s traveling companion, and the Gospel of Mark is mainly Peter’s eyewitness testimony of Jesus (Peter was first known as Simon before Jesus changed his name). This morning we’ll be in Mark 7, looking at another dispute between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day, over how to deal with the uncleanness of our heart.

Mark 7:1-23 - *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." ⁹ And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! ¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' ¹¹ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), ¹² then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. ¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that." 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.'**" ¹⁶ ¹⁷ After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸ "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? ¹⁹ For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.") ²⁰ He went on: "What comes out of a man is what 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.'"

So as this chapter begins, we find that the Pharisee delegation has come once more from Jerusalem to investigate him. As Jesus' fame grows, the religious leaders are becoming more suspicious of him. Remember that last time they visited him, back in chapter 3, they were already plotting to kill him. This time, they see Jesus' disciples eating with unwashed hands, and so they ask him why they eat with unclean hands. **This question is not about hygiene, but about ceremonial cleanliness.** In the Old Testament, there were many laws given by God to Israel about being clean and purifying yourself before God. The only one that included handwashing was the priest before entering the temple. But the Pharisees had added many extra laws to help the people be pure before God. They believed that adding extra layers of laws would help the people keep the laws of the Old Testament. For example, one prominent Old Testament law was that you can't work on the Sabbath. But the Pharisees, in order to ensure that nobody would work, would add laws, such as don't look in a mirror on the Sabbath, because if you saw a gray hair, you might be tempted to pluck it out, and thus perform work on the Sabbath. Or don't wear your false teeth on the Sabbath, because if they fall out, you would pick them up and then you would be working. As you can see, they added layers of laws on top of God's laws, and in the process diluted the power of God's law.

Included among those added laws were laws about ceremonially washing hands before you eat, just to make sure you are eating with pure hands. And not only your hands, but 35 pages of laws about washing your dishes and eating utensils. According to verse 3, this had become a custom that all the Jews participated in. And so when Jesus and his disciples did not wash their hands, the Pharisees questioned them, certainly from a position of superiority, looking down on Jesus and his disciples.

Now, before we move on, let's talk a little about the clean laws and their purpose. According to the OT, many things could make you unclean – touching a dead animal or human, an infectious skin disease, contact with mildew, bodily discharge, and eating from the meat of an unclean animal, among other things. And if you were unclean, then you couldn't enter the temple and worship, and sometimes you might even need to be separated from the rest of the community. What was the purpose of these laws? **They were a visual aid to remember that they were spiritually and morally unclean and couldn't enter the presence of God unless there was spiritual purification.** As you purified your body, you were supposed to

think about how you needed to purify yourself to enter the presence of a Holy God. If this seems foreign to you, it may be helpful to think about what you do if you're going on an important date. You clean yourself, don't you? You make sure that there is no stain, nothing dirty about you, because you want to be clean for the other person. **It can also be helpful to think about other spiritual disciplines, and how an outward physical action can be meant to represent an inward posture towards God.** Two examples: we fast in order to develop spiritual hunger. And we kneel in order to put ourselves in a position of humility.

So the Pharisees challenge Jesus – why don't you and your disciples follow the custom of washing your hands? And Jesus replies with a strong challenge of his own, in three parts.

1) First, he calls them hypocrites

He says that they are phonies, playing a part. He tells them that they honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him. Their outward devotion – their handwashing and pious acts – does not match the state of their heart. They look religious, but inside they are anything but. Clearly we should see that we can not judge a person's heart by their actions. You can do all the right things for the wrong reason. You can come to church for appearances. You can pray to be applauded. You can lead off of a desire for power. And, conversely, you can also have good intentions but have it come out wrong.

2) Secondly, he accuses them of prioritizing the traditions of men over the teachings of God.

The Pharisees believed the traditions of the elders or rabbis were just as binding as the Old Testament scripture. Jesus begs to differ. They call it the tradition of the elders in v. 5. Jesus deliberately calls it “the tradition of men,” contrasting it to the commands of God. And then He gives the example of Corban. What is that? Essentially, if a son declared his property corban, it was dedicated to the temple, and then his parents were legally excluded from benefiting from it. And so they set aside honoring their father and mother for a manmade law. And Jesus goes on to say that they do many other things like that, prioritizing the traditions of men over the commands of God.

3) And thirdly, he teaches that it is not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, but what comes out of their heart.

They have been arguing about food, but Jesus addresses the larger principle. It isn't food that makes people unclean. Jesus says in v. 19 that food goes right through the body without touching the heart. Rather, it is what is inside a man, in his heart, that makes him unclean. The heart in those days was seen as the center of human personality, determining man's entire action. And handwashing, and following clean laws, can not touch the heart. True religion, Jesus is saying, is a matter of the heart, not a matter of what we do or what we eat.

What does this mean for us?

1) Our hearts are not clean before God

In v. 21-23, Jesus lists all the evil things that come from our heart. 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.'*

Our hearts are unclean. Some of you already know this. But even if you don't believe in sin, I bet that you know that there is something wrong with you. You know that if your thoughts and heart were broadcast on this screen, people would be horrified. And if people knew what you had done in your past, what would they think?

Jeremiah 17:9 - *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*

What would show up on this screen? Would people see your secret addictions? Would they see your murderous thoughts? Your lusting after people that you are not married to? Would they see what you have done? The abortion you had. The abuse you doled out on your loved ones? The lying. The stealing. The cheating. The times you spread gossip about other people. What would people see if your hearts and thoughts and history was displayed up here? We know that our hearts are not clean.

Just as the Pharisees attempted to clean themselves from the outside in, we do the same thing.

2) We can not make ourselves clean

What are some ways we try to clean ourselves, to hide the uncleanness of our heart and mind? Let me give you four examples:

Religion – Some of you try to clean yourself through good works and devotion to God or religion, thinking that this will make you acceptable and right with God. But you can never get rid of the uncleanness through religious devotion.

Politics – Some people think we can fix the evil in the world through legislation and the installing the right government. Yes, government is created to restrain evil, and it can help. But it can't cleanse the heart.

Education – Some people believe that if we only educate people, we can make them more moral. If we get rid of our ignorance, then our hearts will become right. But that just doesn't work.

Making yourself beautiful or successful – Maybe you think that you can hide your flaws by being beautiful or successful. If you're attractive, then people will not see your sin, your flaws. And if you're successful, people will overlook your uncleanness. But even that can't cleanse the heart. Even if others overlook it, you still know it's there.

Nothing we do from the outside-in will clean ourselves. No amount of handwashing and purifying will work.

Jeremiah 2:22 - *Although you wash yourself with soda and use an abundance of soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me," declares the Sovereign LORD.*

What are we going to do? This is what the late Billy Graham said:

"The greatest need in the world is the transformation of human nature. We need a new heart that will not have lust and greed and hate in it. We need a heart filled with love and peace and joy, and that is why Jesus came into the world."

What will clean the heart? How do you get a new heart? How do you deal with the sense of uncleanness in your heart? Listen again to v. 18-19:

¹⁸ *"Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'?"* ¹⁹ *For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")*

What does it mean that Jesus declared all foods clean? If the OT is God's Word, and it includes numerous laws about clean and unclean foods and how to approach God in a way that is pure and clean, why would Jesus do away with that? The answer is found in Matthew 5:17-18:

Matthew 5:17-18 - Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Jesus is not abolishing the OT food and purity laws, as if they were a mistake. After all, he said that not even the smallest letter would disappear from the law. **No, he is not abolishing the laws; He is fulfilling them.** What does that mean? The purpose of these laws was to help you towards spiritual purification, to come to God in a clean and pure manner. But washing your hands and eating clean food could never really cleanse the heart. They were only a shadow, pointing to the real thing. And now that real thing is here. How do we get a clean heart?

3) Only Jesus can give you a clean heart.

Listen to this prophecy:

Ezekiel 36:25-27 - I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

God will give us a new heart. And as Paul put it:

2 Corinthians 5:17 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

One of the books I've been using to prepare for my sermons is Tim Keller's book *King's Cross*, a book that really helped me with this sermon. In his chapter on Mark 7, Keller references a sermon he heard on Zechariah 3, which I think is both helpful and powerful in illustrating what we're talking about here. In Zechariah 3, we read about a vision that God gave to the prophet Zechariah:

Zechariah 3:1-9 - Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him.

Zechariah the prophet, has a vision, and he sees the high priest, Joshua, standing in the holy of holies before the angel of the Lord. The only time the high priest was allowed in the holy of holies, the innermost section of the temple, where the Ark of the Covenant was, was once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This was the day that the high priest would go in and offer sacrifices for the people of Israel. He entered the Holy of Holies as a representative of the entire nation of Israel. It was the biggest day of the calendar. And the preparation for this day was very detailed. A week before Yom Kippur, the high priest would be taken away from his home and put in seclusion. The reason is that so he wouldn't accidentally touch or eat anything unclean. Clean food would be brought to him, and he'd wash his body regularly and prepare his heart to go before God. The night before the Day of Atonement, the high priest wouldn't go to bed, but would stay up all night praying and reading God's Word in order to purify his soul. Then on the Day of Atonement, he would bathe head to toe and dress in pure, unstained linen. He would go into the holy of holies and offer an animal sacrifice to God to atone for his own sins. Then he would come out, bathe again, and put on new white linen, before reentering the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifice for the sins of the priest. After that, he would come out a third time, bathe again from head to toe, and dress in brand new linen, before going in one last time to atone for the sins of all the people.

And believe it or not, all of this would be done in public (the bathing would be behind a screen), so that the people could watch and cheer him on as he represented the people before God. The greatest concern was that the high priest would be as clean and pure as possible before the Lord.

With that background, continue reading Zechariah 3:

² *The LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"* ³ *Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel.*

You know those nightmares where you go to school and you're naked? This is that times 1000. With all I just told you about the Day of Atonement, consider this picture. The high priest, Joshua, is standing before the angel of the Lord in the Holy of Holies, and he is dressed in filthy clothes. Filthy is a reference in Hebrew

to excrement. Absolutely defiled. And Satan is standing there accusing him before the Lord.

This is the most pure person in his most purest form on the biggest day of the year, and in Zechariah's vision, he is full of filth. Joshua is representing the people of God, and according to this vision, they are all unclean before the Lord. What does this mean? **In spite of all our efforts to be pure, to cleanse ourselves, this is the condition of our hearts before the Lord.** We stand before the Lord defiled, unclean, and Satan is there accusing us. Liar. Adulterer. Cheat. Slanderer. Murderer. Do you really think bathing three times is going to really make us right before God?

This is how the rest of the scene goes:

⁴ *The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you."* ⁵ *Then I said, "Put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by.* ⁶ *The angel of the LORD gave this charge to Joshua:* ⁷ *"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.'* ⁸ *"Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch.* ⁹ *See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.*

God declares to Joshua that he has taken away his sins. He says that he will put rich garments on him. He tells him that he is going to bring His servant the Branch, which is a name for the Messiah, and at the end he says that he will remove the sins of the land in a single day. In this prophecy that Zechariah sees and shares with Israel, he sees that despite their sin, that no amount of external washing can do away with, one day the Branch will come, and sin will be removed.

Our hearts are unclean before the Lord.

Isaiah 64:6 - *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*

If our heart and thoughts and past were displayed up here on the screen, we would be mortified at what we have done and what we think and what we do. And we hear the voice of Satan accusing us before God as people who are unworthy to stand before our holy God. And all of our efforts to make ourselves clean – the religion, the laws, the learning, the beautifying ourselves, the striving for success – all of those efforts will fall short. They can not take away our guilt. They can not make us clean. They will not make us right with God. But in a single day, our sins will be removed.

You see, Joshua has the same name in Hebrew – Yeshua – as another person, Jesus. And whereas the high priest was filthy before the Lord, there was another high priest, Jesus, who went through His own day of atonement. He also began preparation a week beforehand, when he entered Jerusalem. He also didn't sleep the night before his big day. But instead of being cheered, Jesus, our high priest, was betrayed and abandoned by all who knew him. Instead of being clothed in rich garments, he was stripped naked, beaten, and killed. Instead of being bathed in clean water, He was bathed in human spit.

Hebrews 13:11-13 - *The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.*

Jesus suffered out where the bodies are burned, where the garbage is thrown, outside the camp. Why did He go through such rejection and suffering?

2 Corinthians 5:21 - *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*

On that day, on that cross, God clothed Jesus in our filth, in our sins, so that we could be dressed in His righteousness. He removed our stain, our guilt, and gave us a new heart, clothing us in purity, cleansing us once and for all. And this is why it says:

Revelation 19:7-8 - *Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. ⁸ Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)*

We are given the fine linen. Our filthy garments are removed, and we are made pure. On that single day, Jesus took our sin, our filth, our shame, our guilt. He was rejected, so that we might be clothed in his righteousness.

Nothing in this world can make you clean. The only thing that makes you clean, makes you right with God, is Jesus. Bring your sin before Him and lay it at His feet, and receive His forgiveness and a new, clean heart today.