

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 2, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

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 **2** and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, 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 defiled 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 merely human rules.’

8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

14 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

15 Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

21 For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, **22** adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

23 All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

“New Heart for New Life”

A while back I was getting an Uber ride and asking the driver a little more about his life. He was enjoying driving for Uber and was making good money. In fact, he owned three homes. On the side, he bought and sold luxury watches, getting them at a good price and then selling them for a big profit. Of course, I immediately followed up by asking him where he got those watches. ‘From a friend,’ was his response. Of course he did. But what kind of friend was he? And how authentic were those watches he was getting from his friend? If buying things online has taught us anything over the last twenty years since the internet became a major part of our lives, it’s that we want to beware of the sources of the things we purchase in e-commerce.

But that’s a good reminder in other aspects of our lives too. Beware the source when it comes to serious matters of the heart. Beware the source when someone is teaching about religion and obedience and your relationship with God. That’s exactly what Jesus teaches when he gives us some harsh and difficult words in Mark chapter 7. When we look at the influences from all around us and evaluate the impulses coming from inside us, Jesus helps us see we need a new heart. And that’s exactly what Jesus gives us. A new heart for new life.

Jesus dishes out these severe rebukes after he was called out by the religious authorities of his day. The whole incident started with a rather simple observation: **“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 defiled, that is, unwashed.”** (Mark 7:1,2) Whether they were on a fault-finding mission or just happened to stumble across this apostolic blunder, we don’t know. But they spotted a problem and felt the need to bring it to Jesus’ attention.

It’s interesting that the mistake made by the disciples was that they were eating literally with “common” hands. Being in that category of common just meant it had come into contact with anything and everything. It wasn’t set apart for a special use or consecrated for a sacred purpose. From the perspective of serious religious observers, the disciples hadn’t done something sinful according to levitical law, but had been so nonchalant about their personal purity that they were putting themselves on the fringes of God’s kingdom.

Mark takes a few verses to explain some of the background here. His account of the life and teachings of Jesus was intended primarily for a Roman audience, so they knew about as much about Jewish traditions from over 2,000 years ago as we do today. The tradition of the elders was an oral collection of laws pious practitioners believed had been handed down by Moses to Joshua and then the prophets and elders. This collection of traditions hadn’t been recorded in the Bible, but it was only 1/2 step below the authority of the Bible itself. The intended effect was that it could serve as a fence to be an additional layer of protection to help prevent people from disobeying the written commandments of God.

It just seemed like a practical consideration when the Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus: **“Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”** (Mark 7:5) And we can understand the logic behind those additional traditions. We want to protect our families, so we try to filter out the bad things that come at them. We use ratings on TV shows and movies. We use filtering software on their tablets and smartphones. We put filters on furnaces to help improve the air quality in our homes and filters in our water to take out impurities. We even filter our own language when we are speaking around those toddler cousins who will repeat every word they hear from us.

We know God’s will is an important aspect of our lives. We want our lives to revolve around God’s commandments. And so we add our own traditions to God’s Word just to keep it extra safe. We understand how important coming to church is, even on a holiday weekend. And church is a good start, but Bible study is even better. There really are no excuses. God expects generosity from his people. So it’s really not too much to ask that we give 10% of our income to his work. Witnessing and sharing our faith aren’t really options we should set aside as aspects of our faith. We should provide for the needy and be willing to show compassion to those who are hurting.

But Jesus radically challenges our assumptions. None of those human traditions is bad. In fact they are all beneficial. On the same level of washing hands before eating. There is a reason why Jesus has such harsh words for those Pharisees and religious experts: **“You**

have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.” (Mark 7:8) The biggest problem Jesus wants to address is the heart motivating all those traditions. We get so wrapped up in our obedience, we are completely consumed with our performance, we convince ourselves we’ve somehow worked ourselves closer to God.

Jesus wants us to see the biggest problem we can’t get ourselves over. It’s us. It’s our hearts. He’s changing the way we see ourselves: **“What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.”** (Mark 7:20-22) Just to be clear, Jesus isn’t condoning lives with no boundaries. Jesus isn’t advocating disregard for all of God’s commandments. He’s just trying to get us to see all the things we do and all the things we keep from doing won’t be the answer we need to our biggest problem.

Put it this way. We can do our very best to filter all the bad influences and keep them away from our families. We could put them inside their own personal bubbles to keep impurities out. But that bubble would still be filled with all the toxic things that come from inside us.

The root of our problem is our faulty view of God’s law and our improper way of handling the Law. God did not give us his law to present us with an obstacle course that could prove our worthiness to him. Which is why Jesus can upset the Pharisees another time and teach them: **“The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.”** (Mark 2:27) If anything, the deeper we dig into God’s law, the more we realize we don’t need to make any fences around it or add any human traditions to it. It’s impossible for any of us to perfectly and completely accomplish all of God’s commands in the first place.

Jesus is like that one person who has been sitting through a long and tedious meeting. Then he pipes up and boils all the discussion down into two basic decisions. When the implications of both are clear, the decision is obvious. Jesus moves the focus of God’s people away from regulations onto relationships. During his lifetimes Jesus regularly shocked the sensibilities of good religious people fixated on ritual piety. He came into contact with lepers and adulterers, people who would have brought him obvious contamination in the eyes of Pharisees. He wanted to reach people who were perfectly aware of their sinfulness. They had no hope of living up to any standards, human or divine. They were perfectly conscious of how impure and defiled their hearts were.

And so Jesus reached out to them with his perfect heart. Jesus is the only one who had a heart that was freed from the burden of comparing himself to others and pointing how his purity was so much better than theirs. Jesus wasn’t so wrapped up in his own performance. Because he was the only human being who never had any impurities or disobedience that took root in his heart. Jesus was perfectly compassionate to the people around him because there were no toxic desires taking root. He didn’t suffer from any of our common evil thoughts: **“sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy.”** (Mark 7:21,22) Jesus had a perfect relationship with his God. He never tried to be a rival or knock his Father off his throne. He never had a heart filled with **“slander, arrogance and folly.”** (Mark 7:22) And because of what he did, now **“Christ is the end of**

the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” (Romans 10:4 ESV) In Jesus the law of God reaches its goal.

The solution to our human hearts isn't adding more commandments or traditions. It's not disregarding God's law or picking and choosing the morality we feel is right for us. It's not throwing in the towel and living however we want since perfection is impossible. Jesus is the only solution for sinful hearts. The perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ is our only solution.

That gives an entirely new perspective on obedience toward God, observing God's commandments and human traditions. Obedience is about more than just doing good and avoiding evil. New life comes from new hearts filled by the perfect forgiveness of Jesus. That's why Martin Luther has the rather redundant beginning to his explanations for every commandment. We fear, love and trust in God so that we do the things he commands. Hearts filled with his love, trusting in Christ alone such respect for God that we avoid the evils he condemns.

So each new day for a Christian isn't about climbing another rung higher on a ladder of obedience toward God. It's a return to who we are. As baptized children of God we have been washed and purified. The Bible describes your baptismal identity like this: **“this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”** (1 Peter 3:21) So for all the evil influences you can't quite filter out from your life, rest in your baptismal relationship with Jesus. For all the vile and toxic things you can't prevent from coming out of your own heart, return to the forgiveness of your perfect Savior. The blood of Jesus covers over every wrong. And then live generously through the new heart given to you by Jesus.

A while back some family members were visiting and we decided to go on a hike near Durango. They spotted a beautiful mountain stream and just couldn't help themselves. It was so icy cold on that hot summer day and the water looked so clear. By the time they were warned about its dangers, it was too late. The next week was spent sharing digestive system horror stories. You have to beware the source.

But with new hearts filled with the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ, we have a generosity flowing through our lives. Rather than hearts filled with the toxic sense of obligation toward God's Word, we are filled with the blessed privilege to hear God's Word and study God's Word and make it a priority for our lives. When Jesus has given you absolutely everything you need for entrance into eternal bliss, we can open the treasures of our financial blessings to give beyond 10% of our income. We can generously redistribute the gifts of peace and forgiveness to other confused souls. Hearts swept clean of guilt and shame can generously reach out to those hurting and struggling to give them the hope we know in Jesus Christ. We don't have to get hung up on human traditions or get consumed by comparing ourselves with others. New lives come from the new hearts given us by Jesus Christ. Amen.