

Mark 7:1-23

7 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?” 6 He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;

7 In vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

8You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

9Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! 10For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ 11But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)— 12then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, 13thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

14Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

17When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, 19since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. 21For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

The Word of God

The Word of Life

Today’s gospel focuses on acceptance, character, and integrity, although it starts with a conflict Jesus and his disciples have with the Pharisees.

Meals are essential to our identity, and today's story involves ritual purity, which must be maintained before a meal. Jesus also uses a dispute over this issue with the Pharisees to teach about true defilement and purity.

The Pharisees attack Jesus and his disciples over ritual purity. The disciples don't wash their hands before they eat. This was not a matter of hygiene. It ensured that they maintained ritual purity and their identity as faithful people of God. It was a mark of distinction that separated them from others.

Now, the Pharisees were the folks who tried to maintain Jewish identity and keep strict adherence to God's ways in an environment with ever-new challenges.

They faced a dominant Roman Culture that sometimes could be very seductive. The Pharisees wanted to prevent polluting their faith by the Gentile World surrounding them.

Many have said they built a fence around God's commandments with traditions that made things forbidden, which might lead to breaking God's law.

A silly example is if the law were not to go into the pool's deep end, they would say to stay away from the pool altogether.

Today's story focuses on washing hands before a meal to ensure one is not contaminated and thus unclean. This had nothing to do with hygiene. This sounds irrelevant to us, but it wasn't to the Pharisees. They believed that ritual purity maintains their acceptance by God.

The Pharisees knew that in a foreign-dominated culture, they must maintain their religious heritage by following various rituals and practices. This was one way that reminded them of who they were and the danger of losing their identity. If they lost their identity, they would lose their connection to God. The rituals were signs of faithfulness and ensured their continued connection to God and identity as God's people.

Before we get too hard on them, let's remember our 200th anniversary. As I researched the way things were two hundred years ago, I found things quite different than we do now. We two had our fences. From a moral fence around the communion table, with a warning: The profane, ignorant, and the scandalous are not to be admitted versus our open invitation to **all** who want to come.

Women elders, deacons, and pastors, as well as gender and sexual identity issues, were not even on the radar. Almost everything we do now and how we do it required a change in our traditions; some were controversial and painful, and maybe some still are.

The way things were done did not seem like peripheral issues but fundamental issues of Christian identity. Changing them sometimes felt like putting our faith at risk.

I know that "We've never done it that way before."

was used long before our time. Many changes that are part of our reality required change that is often resisted and quite painful.

The Pharisees had an Us vs them mentality. They looked at those who were not like them and saw them as “the other.” They othered them and saw them by divine decree, not God’s people.

That’s a relatively new word for me. Othered, as a verb, to other someone is to exclude someone and look down on them as less than we are. As God’s people, we must avoid this practice.

This was not Jesus’ way, and as is so common, his harshest words are for the religious establishment, who dwell on us versus them. I remember he also dined with the Pharisees, showing them acceptance even though he often battled with them. The Pharisees let their righteousness get in the way of the heart of the law, **loving God and loving neighbor**. For them, piety was rules and traditions equated with God’s will.

Thus, though the command of God to wash hands was not required for all Jews, only the priests, according to the law of Moses, the Pharisees insisted on ritual cleanness surrounding meals for everyone. All must wash their hands. They believed this helped them remember and maintain their identity as a people called by God for special service.

Their focus on not being like the culture surrounding them caused them to miss their call to be a light to the nations and call all people to God. They didn’t realize that being different did not require separation. We are in the world to make God’s love known, and looking down on, othering, people destroys this purpose.

It must be noted that not all Jews followed or believed like the Pharisees. Then, as now, there were no monolithic people called the Jews. There were many ways and shades of Jewish identity.

So, Jesus disputes with the Pharisees and accuses them of following human traditions that don’t come from God. There is an example used by Jesus where he attacks a tradition called Corban, which appears to be some holy tax shelter not mentioned in Scripture that avoids providing for parents as the Ten Commandments demand by declaring their wealth is dedicated to God.

Jesus says this is how you honor God with your lips; you say the right things, but your hearts are not in harmony with your actions, words, or God’s way. Essentially, he says they have no integrity because they claim to honor God in ways that do not honor God.

After this, he gets specific. It is not what comes from the outside that makes one impure, defiled, or alienates them from God. It is what comes from the heart that determines our character.

For the Jewish people, including Jesus, the heart was considered the center of a person’s being. It was the location of emotions and intelligence and where our words and deeds spring. Good and evil can spring from the heart, and aligning our hearts with God is essential.

Jesus is direct and clarifies that it is not things like failing to wash food from the marketplace or washing hands before eating, externals from the outside that pollute you. The internal stuff that comes from the heart can make you impure.

Now, both good and evil dwell in our hearts. I know this, but I like to focus on the good; that is why I greet you with Good Morning Saints, not Good Morning Sinners, although we are usually a mixture of both. I believe God sees us as saints, and if God sees us as sinners, it is as forgiven sinners. God looks at us with eyes of love, even if we don't always believe this. And these divine loving eyes are the eyes we will use to gaze at each other.

Now I know that people with an addiction might claim drugs, alcohol, tobacco, or pornography, things that come from the outside, can and do pollute us. But in essence, these addictions usually reflect something on the inside that we are dealing with, things that are not healthy for us. These externals represent an inner condition of the heart.

I remember when my daughter told me my clothes didn't match. Jesus wants us to know that God wants us to match our insides and outsides based on God's love for the world and the command to love God and our neighbors.

Our words and deeds come from our hearts. I think Jesus had Ps 51:10 in mind:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

This is so to the point that we must make it part of our daily prayers and devotions.

From this clean heart, God creates Jesus-like actions flow. It is this harmony that makes up our faithful character. In some circles, it is fashionable to say character doesn't matter, but it does; it reveals who we are. Our character and integrity testify to our faith in God when God's spirit in our hearts creates a morally faithful life.

We know that God's law helps us when we are out of balance. Sometimes, we do what is right even when we don't feel like it. Indeed, sometimes, doing the right thing even when we don't feel like it can be a step toward renewing our hearts and creating that inward-outward balance.

So, Jesus is speaking about character and integrity. What we do matters, and why we do it also matters. A clean heart leads to a moral life.

So, how do we get ourselves clean? We earnestly Pray Psalm 51:10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." When we dare to pray this prayer, we are building a bridge that God will cross and enter our hearts.

But we know we don't always match our hearts and deeds with God's love. Does this place us outside of God's people and other us? Does it make God see us as others?

A line from the poem Footprints speaks to me on this issue. A person looks back over their life and wonders where God was during the worst times. When times were good, I saw your footprints and mine, but there was only one set of footprints during those worst times. Where were you, God? And God replies, "I was carrying you when you only saw one set of footprints."

The line I like goes “The Lord replied, ‘My precious, precious child. I love you, and I would never, never leave you during your times of trial and suffering.’”

Even when our lives fail to match the life God wants for us, we are still God’s precious, precious child.

God is always with us, even when we fail to live lives of faithful character and integrity, even in our deepest struggles. The powerful news of the Gospel is that God accepts us and forgives us.

God grants us what we deeply need: perfect understanding and perfect forgiveness. But without accepting that love and forgiveness, we cannot experience it ourselves. Remember, as I say so often, God loves us, adores us, treasures us, and holds us in God's very heart. Our trust in this and the experience of knowing we are loved enables us to experience the clean heart God gives us.

Then we enter the holy circle, the circle of life in Christ; a clean heart leads to good acts, which leads to a clean heart, which leads to more good acts.

This day, let Ps 51:10 be our prayer.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me live in our hearts.