

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and² 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.’ ” (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

How Can You Be Clean?

When the weather is warm, I like to wear a nice polo shirt to make calls or to teach class. One of my favorites has the logo from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. One day this summer, I put it on and I happened to look in the mirror and you know what I saw? A stain, right here under the logo, right where that logo draws your eyes. My wife tried to get it out. But you know how stains are. Sometimes, you’ll ruin the shirt before you get the stain out of the fabric. Today, we want to talk about a stain that every one of us has to deal with. It’s not on your favorite shirt. It’s in your soul. We call it “sin.” Jesus had that stain on his mind in our gospel lesson for today as he dealt with some Jewish leaders. Like us, they had to wrestle with sin. Like us, they tried to find ways of making themselves feel better about the sins they were guilty of. Jesus points out how worthless those efforts were. What he says here can be really discouraging because most of us wrestle with feeling guilty – we feel the stain of our sin. And we really want it to go away. But how do we make that happen? My friends, **how can you be clean?**

I.

By recognizing where our filth comes from. Our gospel reading opens with a group of Pharisees and teachers of the law confronting Jesus because they saw some of his disciples eating without washing their hands. Now, that concern might sound familiar to some of the moms here, but this was long before anybody understood that germs cause disease. Their concern had nothing to do with health or sanitation. It was strictly religious. In the Old Testament, God gave Israel purity laws. If a person was unclean, they couldn’t go into the temple or participate in worship life. Lots of things that people encountered in everyday life could make you unclean and unacceptable to God.

Why did God set this system up? He was teaching them that our world is contaminated by sin. It infects every aspect of our lives. Sin will keep us out of God’s presence eternally if we don’t deal with it. But the Pharisees didn’t understand that. They thought that keeping all these purity laws would make them righteous in God’s sight. So they invented hundreds of additional laws designed to make sure that they never violated one of these purity laws. Handwashing was one of those additional laws. God simply did not command the Jewish people to wash their hands before they ate. That’s why it’s called here “the tradition of the elders.”

Jesus pointed out that this attempt to make up laws to make sure they were righteous before God could only hurt their faith. The Jews had convinced themselves that uncleanness came from outside. But Jesus said that real uncleanness comes from inside, from our hearts. That's where attitudes like greed and lust and hatred live. And that's where sinful words and actions are born. That sin is what makes us truly unclean in God's eyes. Every time we commit a sin, we show how filthy we are. Every time we have a sinful thought or a sinful desire, we demonstrate that the filth of sin is still clinging to us.

The Lutheran confessions call sin a stain that inheres in us. What they mean is that sin is not part of what we are. We're not made of sin – otherwise Jesus could not have been a real human being and still been without sin. But sin is so deeply embedded into the fabric of who we are that we can never bleach it out in this life. That sin makes every part of our lives filthy. Even when we're here in church, it shows itself. When we daydream, when we see someone here we dislike, when we're jealous or petty here, we show that sin has stained us down to our core.

But God calls us to live new and holy lives. How can we do that? The first step is understanding where our filth comes from – our own hearts. That's just as important today as it was when Jesus said these words. Today, most people think that people are basically good. So any sin or guilt that they pick up must come from something outside them. Their parents do a lousy job of teaching them or society has out of date ideas that make them feel guilty. Something happens to twist people and then they do bad things. Or guilt is just an unhealthy emotion that needs to be gotten rid of before it leads you into all kinds of unhealthy behaviors. And to be fair, guilt is an extremely powerful emotion. People who feel guilty often engage in self-destructive behaviors to try to get away from that feeling, if only for a little while. Or people do what the Pharisees did: they make up little laws that they can keep to make themselves feel like they're really good people. Sometimes those little laws directly contradict what God says. Today, it's not handwashing. It's tolerance for people who live a different lifestyle than you do. It's political correctness and rejecting those outmoded ideas that you heard about in catechism class. It's putting a "coexist" sticker on your car so everyone can see how enlightened you are. Hopefully, that will make you feel good about yourself when you feel guilty.

But God built the capacity to feel guilty into us to call us to repent. Then he provided the solution to our guilt and our sin: Jesus. You and I were born sinners and the stain touches all that we are. But Jesus was born without that stain. So no sinful attitudes ever flowed out of his heart – no hatred or greed or lust. And no sinful actions were ever born in his heart. No theft or adultery or insults. Jesus lived a perfect life in our place. And God now gives us credit for that perfection and he calls us perfect. Jesus died and he paid for all the sin that we have committed. His blood washes the filth out of our record. God calls us forgiven. And in our baptism, God washed us personally. In communion, in the sermons we hear, in every way that God proclaims the gospel to us, he comes to us and washes our hearts and our consciences clean. He gives us peace.

Now, on this side of heaven, that doesn't end our filth because we still have a sinful nature that wallows in the mud and leads us to sin over and over again. That's why we keep coming back to church. We need to be washed again and again. But when we reach heaven, the sin inside us will die. The stain will be bleached out and we will be holy and righteous, not just in the way God sees us, but in our hearts as well. So every thought and desire, every word and action that comes out of our hearts will be holy and perfect. Until we get there, we keep coming back to Jesus for peace and cleansing.

II.

That peace is the only real solution for guilt. That matters as we wrestle with guilt. But what about living a new and better life? The gospel is not just another form of therapy designed to make you feel better about yourself. It's designed to assure you that all your sins are gone and you will live with Jesus. Then it works in our hearts to change the way we live here. **How can you be clean? By living in repentance.**

That really is what the Christian life is all about. It's not about me being good enough to get into heaven. I can't be that good. And Jesus has already given me heaven. It's about me fighting against my sinful nature every day and striving to live for Jesus who forgave me and won a place in heaven for me and who promises to walk with me and strengthen me and even pick me up and welcome me back when I sin again. It's not about setting goals and reaching ever higher levels of spiritual performance. It's about walking with Jesus each day. It's about focusing on the temptations I face right now and the challenges that the devil throws in my path today.

The life God calls us to live is not something that we measure by counting our good works. It's not about how much money I give to the church, even though God calls us to be generous in supporting his work. It's not about how well I treat my wife, even though God calls us to love and honor our spouses. It's not about comparing myself and my life with all those people out there who don't measure up to what I think a Christian should be. Living in repentance means that I know where my sin comes from: my own heart. And I know my Savior, Jesus, who died and rose for me. Today, we ask for his help and we commit ourselves to living the kind of life he calls us to live. So we love and honor our spouses. We give generously to the Lord. We show love for the people around us and make sacrifices for the good of others, all because Jesus has done so much more for us. And he is going to bring us home.

Part of that new life is knowing what God commands. Not to beat myself up with those laws, but so I know what God considers to be a new and holy life. The believer inside me wants to follow the path that Jesus lays out. And part of that new life is knowing the freedom that God gives us. The Old Testament ceremonial laws don't apply to us. And no manmade religious laws have any hold on us. God does not tell us that we can't drink alcohol. He tells us we can't get drunk. God does not tell us we have to give ten percent to church. He tells us to carefully consider what he has given us and give back to God a generous offering. God does not even tell us that we have to be in church every seven days. He tells us not to stop meeting together. He tells us to treasure his word and the fellowship of believers. He tells us to join together in singing his praise and coming to communion. He tells us to share the joys and sorrows of life with our church family.

Do you see the difference? Many years ago, one of my cousins got married. That whole side of my family is Roman Catholic. After the Saturday wedding which included a mass, there was an honest discussion in my uncle's house about whether that mass counted for that week. Did they have to go to mass on Sunday too, or were they good? God doesn't call us to count and make lists of obligations. He calls us to treasure the gospel and the fellowship of believers and come joyfully and frequently to his house.

We Lutherans call that concept "Christian freedom." But we need to be careful about it. We don't use our Christian freedom to see how close to the edge we can get. How much can I drink before I'm drunk? How lightheaded or buzzed can I be before I sin? That's not the right attitude. Christian freedom is about being free from the slavery of manmade laws. But it's not a license to sin or to take spiritual risks.

Christian freedom needs to always be used in love. It might be true that I could skip church this weekend and next weekend. But can my children? What message will they get about how important it is to hear God's Word if I don't make it a priority in my life? If the way I use my freedom confuses other Christians, I am not using my freedom the way that Jesus intended me to.

The Bible tells us to flee from temptation. If one beer is almost certainly going to lead to another and another and another until I am clearly sinning, maybe I need to avoid that one beer. If certain situations cause me to sin, even if those situations are not sinful in themselves, I might have to avoid them to preserve my faith. But again, it's not about patting myself on the back because I make such great sacrifices for God. It's about knowing my weakness and knowing my Savior. It's about God changing my heart and leading me to live a life that is washed from sin.

I may not get my Seminary polo back to a state where I can wear it in public. The stain just might be so deep that the fabric will tear before it comes out. That's the way stains are. In this life, no amount of beating ourselves up and no list of rules can remove the stain of sin. We will die before it is gone from our hearts. But Jesus has washed our sin away in God's eyes. In our baptism, he covered our stains with a clean, white robe so God doesn't see them anymore. Jesus has put a new and holy person in our hearts next to the sinner. He fights for us every day. Jesus washes us clean every time we come here. And one day, he will call us home and we will be free and clean forever. Until that day, live in repentance. Hear the gospel and be washed. Be at peace in God's forgiveness and strive to live a new life. Amen.