

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 “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)

What Makes Us Unclean?

A few years ago, I watched a “Downtown Abby” type show on PBS. I don’t remember what show it was. But in it, the servants in this Victorian mansion were preparing the table for a formal dinner. One of the servants noticed that the silver had spots on it. You know what he did? He spit on it and polished it with his sleeve and then put it back down on the table for someone to eat with. Disgusting, huh? Of course it was television, but presumably whoever made that show believes that servants used to do things like that. Why does it disgust us? Germs, right? To us, that spoon is no longer clean, no matter how shiny it might look.

In the Bible, God used the word “unclean” many times. He used it on purpose. Even in societies that didn’t know anything about germs, being unclean made someone unacceptable to the people who were clean. God used that imagery to teach us something about ourselves: we all start out unclean. But God also used that kind of language so that he could then proclaim that now we have had a bath in the blood of Christ. To understand that bath, we have to understand the filth that was on us. **What makes us unclean?**

I.

When Jesus lived on this earth, the Jewish people still lived under the Old Testament law code. That law code determined who was clean and who was unclean. They weren’t talking about whether you needed a physical bath. They were talking about ritual cleanness. If you were unclean, you couldn’t come into the temple or participate in the great festivals that their lives revolved around. You couldn’t worship or make sacrifices. You were cut off from God and from your fellow Israelites until you went through a cleansing ritual. What was God teaching with this? He was teaching them about sin. Sin cuts us off from fellowship with God and with other Christians. Sin makes us unclean and unacceptable in God’s eyes. The Jewish people didn’t really grasp all that. In fact, I’ve heard academics give lectures in which they argued that Jewish purity laws really didn’t have anything to do with morality or sin. But they’ve missed the point. God was teaching his people to take a good hard look at themselves so that they would see what he sees.

Jesus proves that point. On a day when he and his disciples were attacked on this issue of ritual purity, Jesus said, **“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.’”** For the Jews, all kinds of things could make them unclean – contact with a dead body, all kinds of bodily fluids, leprosy, contact with dead animals, and more. And there was a long list of unclean foods, like pork. But Jesus was saying that even though God set that system up in the Old

Testament, it was a teaching tool designed to get us to think in terms of cleanness and uncleanness, of things that God approves of and things he rejects.

Then Jesus said, **“What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”** Sin makes us unclean. Sin makes us repulsive to God. If I’ve been out working in my wife’s garden and I’m covered with mud and sweat and who know what else, and then I come into the house and try to give her a big, smelly hug, she’s going to avoid me. I know. I’ve tried it. Why? She doesn’t want all that mud and sweat and dirt on her. That’s God’s reaction to our sin. He doesn’t want it. He doesn’t like it. It smells just as bad to him as I smell to my wife after hours of that kind of work.

That sin comes out of our own hearts. Now, Jesus is not saying that people never tempt us. They obviously do. Sometimes, our kids see someone doing something sinful that they never thought of before and it gives them the idea to do it, too. But we sin because our hearts are evil. At the moment we are conceived, our only god is ourselves. We live to serve ourselves. We care nothing for anyone or anything else. If you don’t believe that, just spend some time with small children. If you don’t believe, just look at the world around us. Now, I know that might not be enough to convince you. We want to believe that babies are innocent and that children are basically good, they’re just taught the wrong things. We want to believe that we’re good people and that we would be good people even if we weren’t believers. But the more we look at what God says, the more realize how guilty we are. I once had a young man in Bible Information Class. While we were studying the Ten Commandments, he said, “Pastor, before I took this class, I felt like I was a good person.” He was a really, really nice young man. But he said, “When we study these things, it makes me feel guilty.” He was discovering what God actually says: nothing good lives in our sinful nature. Nothing good comes out of our hearts until Jesus changes them.

What does come out? Evil thought and evil deeds. Jesus gives us a list. And maybe we haven’t committed everything on his list. Most of us get through life without committing murder or cheating on our spouses. But every one of us can find all kinds of things on Jesus’ list that we know we’re guilty of. And the point our Lord is making is that all that stuff comes out of our own hearts. All that stuff ruins and contaminates all that we are and leaves God with no choice but to flush us out of his presence and into hell. **What makes us unclean? The sin that comes out of our hearts.**

It’s so tempting for us to make excuses for that sin. It’s so easy for us to point to other people who do worse, or to justify our actions because everyone else is doing it, or to say that guys like me are out of touch with our society, and that we’re hypocrites. If that means that I’m accusing you of sins that I commit myself, then it’s true. I am just as sinful as you are. But that doesn’t make it right and it doesn’t calm our consciences. There is only one way to deal with the sin we were born with, the sin that shows itself in countless ways every single day of our lives: through Jesus. Through Jesus God washed all our sin away. God even gave us holy baptism to make that point as clear as it possibly could be. God combined his promise of forgiveness with simple water and he washed all our sins away. He made us clean in his own sight. When he did that, he gave us faith and a new heart that fights against that sin inside us.

St. Paul tells us in Romans that we were baptized into Jesus’ death. The Scriptures also say that Jesus’ blood washes all our sins away. I think in our modern, germophobic society, that image is worth dwelling on. If you work in a hospital and you have to clean up bloody sheets or bandages, you treat those things like biohazards. If you get a patient’s blood on you, you wash it off. Maybe you even take a shower because you could get some terrible disease from that blood. But the blood of Jesus washes over our hearts and our souls. Instead of making us dirty and in need of a bath, Jesus’ blood make us clean. It takes all our sin and guilt away. So in baptism, we are dipped into Jesus’ death. In communion, we share his body and blood and our sin is gone. That forgiveness is the only thing that can quiet our consciences. It’s the only thing that can make us acceptable in God’s sight. You are now cleansed and dressed in white robes. And you will live with Jesus forever.

II.

Now, when we say that, we’re talking about how God sees us, just like we were when we talked about being unclean. We don’t always see ourselves that way because we continue to sin down here. One day, we will be truly cleansed. We won’t have any sin in our hearts anymore, so no more sin will come out in our lives.

But that only happens in heaven. Because we keep wrestling with sin and even falling into it, because the Christian life is marked by guilt and restoration and that can be very painful, many people try to find a way to feel better apart from the message of Jesus and his forgiveness. One way they do that is by making up laws that God didn't make and trying to follow them and even hold those laws up as what real Christians do.

That's what the Jewish people of Jesus' day did. They jumped on the disciples because they ate with unwashed hands. Don't think about those signs you see in the bathroom at restaurants: "Employees must wash hands before they return to work." This wasn't about germs. God never gave a law that said that the Jews had to wash their hands before they ate. God never gave a law that said they had to wash pitchers and kettles and dining couches. Those were traditions that the Jewish people came up with. Probably they started with people saying things like, "Well, if being unclean is wrong and keeps us out of the temple, let's be extra sure we're clean and wash our hands every time we eat to make sure there's no way we're unclean." They made up a rule that they thought would help them keep God's rule.

But the truth is – and this is always true with legalism – they didn't guarantee obedience with their made up laws. Rather, they made up laws that they could keep, like washing their hands and their kettles and their dining couches, and they ignored laws that they couldn't keep, like loving their neighbor as themselves, like honoring their father and mother, like showing mercy to the poor, like always using God's name properly and avoiding lust and temptation and on and on and on. The human heart does not like to feel guilty. So we often make up rules we can keep and we treat them like God's rules. That allows us to pat ourselves on the back and avoid the unpleasant reality of repenting for those sins. **What makes us unclean? The rules that we make up to worship God.**

What might be examples today? We could spend a lot of time on practices of other churches that do this over and over again, but let's focus on ourselves. What about praying before meals? God never commands that. Now, like washing your hands, it's not a bad thing. It's a tradition that we Christians have inherited. In my house, we're going to follow it. But do we ever feel like that table prayer makes us good Christians? Another example might be our liturgy in church. Again, that can be a very beneficial thing. But I can remember when I was in catechism class how proud I was that I could get all the way through the liturgy without ever looking at it. I used to imagine that other people in church were impressed by that. That was pure sinful pride. Today, I find that if I don't open my hymnal, it's much easier for my mind to wander. And my practice of always opening my hymnal could become an example of pure sinful pride, too. I could probably come up with all kinds of other things that we incorporate into our lives thinking, "God has to be happy with me because I do this." Do we use those things to avoid taking a deeper look at ourselves?

That sin comes out of the same sinful heart as all those other sins Jesus mentioned. And it has the same solution. Only Jesus perfectly kept all that God commands his whole life long. Only Jesus had a heart that was perfectly devoted to God. Now, he gives that perfection to us. We are now as perfect in God's sight as Jesus was. He died and paid for all that pride and hypocrisy, for all those efforts to avoid thinking about what is really wrong with us, for all those fake good works that we thought saved us. He rose. He rose and God says that our sin is gone. He rose, and we are clean in his sight. And the day is coming when we will be free from that sin and we won't need to make anything up because we will truly live as God calls us to live.

Until that day comes, God calls us to be honest. He calls us to live in repentance. That means acknowledging our sin to him and then clinging to his forgiveness. He calls us to dedicate ourselves, day in and day out, first of all to his message of forgiveness, then through the power of that message, to the new life he calls us to live. Each day, as he forgives us and nurtures us, he overcomes our need to invent ways to feel better about ourselves. We have his love in Christ. We have all we need. Live now for him. Amen.