

Sermon Draft

Text: Mark 7:1–13

Sermon: “Clean Hands, Clean Hearts”

Clean hands are important. We have been re-introduced to this concept during this pandemic. But we should not have ever forgotten it. Our moms for the most part taught us to wash our hands as soon as we could reach the sink.

We expect any restaurant at least to provide the customer with a place to wash his or her hands. Hand sanitizers are popping up everywhere. Employers have strict polices about hand washing. Yet, who's to tell us when our hands are truly clean? Scientists, doctors, teachers, parents, employers?

There are those who argue we have so sanitized our world, including our hands, that our children are growing up *less* healthy than we did, more susceptible to resistant microbes. Everyone it seems is allergic to something. All this pales to unimportance, though, when we compare it to the question of a clean heart.

The contrast between Jesus' reception at the end of Mark 6 and his encounter with the Pharisees and scribes in our passage to open chapter 7 is remarkable. The contagious excitement about a Jesus who heals all who come to him is replaced with a concern about the ritual cleanliness of his disciples' hands. ***“Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. . . . And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”*** (vs 1–2, 5).

Some time ago, a Hollywood celebrity, as part of a high-profile visit, had the chance to spend an afternoon with the president of Taiwan. Surprisingly, the topic this celebrity wanted to pursue was the treatment of dogs in Taiwan. Humane treatment of animals is certainly important, but I don't think that would be the issue I would speak about.

If you had the opportunity for a private audience with Jesus, would you argue about the proper way to wash up before a meal? It may even be that this was not a matter of the disciples not washing their hands at all, but of not washing their hands thoroughly enough to meet the Pharisees' standard. Jesus' opponents seem to have completely lost sight of what really matters before God. The way they ask their question suggests that the root of the problem is that they've begun to put human concerns before and above what's important in God's eyes. Our initial sympathy with the Pharisees' concern over clean hands at the table goes right down the drain when we begin to see the real problem in all its seriousness.

Our Lord reminds his questioners that they still need to learn the age old lesson from their ancestors. Centuries before, through his prophet Isaiah, the Lord had tried to teach Israel to check for true cleanliness by considering their hearts:

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (vs 6–7).

We may make the same mistake they were making if we miss the very important way Jesus introduces this quote from Isaiah.

“Well did the prophet Isaiah prophesy of you.” Right after this, Jesus will speak of the Commandments God gave through Moses and how these ancient words of God should be shaping the lives and thoughts of his hearers. The Pharisees are more concerned about whether people’s hands are clean than what is the state of their hearts. They were more concerned with the physical state of the people rather than the spiritual state.

That’s exactly the sort of thing that happens when we stop asking what’s important to God.

You’ve heard the expression “lip service,” and you probably know what it means.

Did you know that expression was inspired by this passage in the Gospels and by the passage from Isaiah Jesus quotes here? Or that's what many scholars say anyway. No one is impressed by outward professions that are completely unsupported by attitude and action.

The Lord's words, both in Isaiah and in Mark, may suggest another image, however, when he speaks of far distant hearts. Here we might think of close lips and distant hearts. Have you ever had the uncomfortable or even annoying experience of someone whom you know inwardly opposes you greeting you warmly even with a handshake, an embrace, a kiss? We immediately think of the example of the kiss of Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane. Was there ever a case of greater separation between lips and hearts?

But what if Isaiah's words are prophesied about us, and if Jesus' warnings speak to us, we need to examine our own lips and hearts and heads and hands to see how we are doing.

How have we lost sight of what's really important? What traditions of men, what traditions of our own, have we let crowd out God's Word from its proper place as the Word that demands our total obedience? In what ways have we ceased to care about the hearts of those around us and taken, instead, to examining the cleanliness of their hands?

The proof of the pudding is in the eating whether our hands are washed or not! The wrongness of the Pharisees' approach is shown in the behavior that results. Replacing God's Word with man's, listening to human traditions that establish themselves at the cost of the honor due God's Word, results in a life lived only for self. Our Lord points to one of our most fundamental relationships to make this clear: ***"He said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die."***

But you say, “If a man tells his father or his mother, ‘Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban’” (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do’” (vs 9–13).

When our own voices and no others guide us, when our hearts are filled with self and far from God, even those dearest to us will suffer the consequences. Instead of gratitude, honor, obedience, and love toward those who have endured pain and deprivation to give us life, we look for excuses and loopholes so that we can be free of the burden of caring for our parents.

Though the particulars of this example may be hard for us to reconstruct, Jesus’ concluding “and many such things” shows that this is merely one example of what life turned in upon itself looks like.

The contrast between images and definitions of marriage in our world today and the picture of marriage that Paul gives us in our Epistle from Ephesians 5 is just one more example. It is a long list. Our hands may be clean, but our hearts are filthy.

Human traditions may set standards for outward cleanliness, but they can never make us clean within. Jesus points out the true source of the Pharisees' uncleanness because he wants to make them clean.

This is clearly demonstrated in the casting out of the unclean spirit and the compassion Jesus shows the crowds in the accounts that follow. Jesus draws our attention away from human traditions, which cannot save us, to focus on God's Word, which can.

God's words, spoken to us and for us, expose the "dirt behind our ears," the dirt we have been hiding in the hope no one would see, the dirt that clogs our hearts and shuts them down, the "dirt" that kills.

But the point of all this is not so God can say, “Look, you are dirty!” Rather, our Lord calls us from human tradition to God’s Word and his priorities and letting his voice declare us clean, so that he can say, by his death on the cross, ***“Come to me, and I will make you clean.”***

Amen