

## Sermon Draft for September 1, 2024

Text: Mark 7:14–23

Sermon: “The Heart of the Matter”

During the season of Pentecost, our hearts are focused on the life of Christ’s church. By nature, however, our hearts are focused on anything but this life in Christ. Our Gospel contains no good news about our hearts. Rather, **“out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts”** (Mark 7:21). Yes, God says that **“the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth”** (Genesis 8:21), and, **“the heart is deceitful above all things . . . and desperately sick; who can understand it?”** (Jeremiah 17:9).

This clean heart we have through faith in Jesus does not eradicate the natural, defiled heart within us, though. Instead, we still have the old man (Romans 7:18). Thus, in the Old Testament Reading, the Lord tells Israel to listen to everything he is teaching them. **“Only take care,” he says, “and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life”**

(Deuteronomy 4:9a).

How do we **“take care,”** though? The only “source of all that is just and good,” our Collect reminds us, is God. He alone will “nourish in us every virtue and bring to completion every good intent that we may grow in grace and bring forth the fruit of good works.” The Epistle teaches that God causes us to **“stand against the schemes of the devil” by giving us “the whole armor of God”** (Ephesians 6:11). We **“stand firm”** (v 13) by putting on this baptismal armor, taking up this armor that he provides us through his means of grace. With this armor on, our hearts remain clean through faith alone, and we are connected to Christ, the source of our new spiritual life.

The Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus when they witnessed his disciples eating with defiled, unwashed hands. This contradicted the tradition of the elders. They questioned Jesus for allowing his disciples to do this.

Jesus called them hypocrites, quoting Isaiah, ***“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”*** last week’s Gospel from Mark 7. This “heart” of the Pharisees and scribes, and really of all mankind, Jesus speaks to more specifically in our Gospel text.

“Just follow your heart.” Undoubtedly, we’ve heard this popular advice from someone before. But even those who are not Christians know it’s terrible advice. Some psychologists suggest we should follow our head or our gut instead, the seats of the intellect and intuition. But we Christians disagree with this solution too.

We disagree because while we believe the heart is sinful and shouldn’t be followed, we also believe the sinful heart is the source of a sinful intellect and intuition, a sinful understanding and will. This is the way the Scriptures speak of the heart.

Thus, the solution to “Just follow one’s heart” or “Just follow your intellect” or “Just follow your intuition” won’t work. The only real solution is God acting outside of us and for our benefit. And that is what he does! God takes our defiled hearts and creates clean, fruitful hearts by His Gospel.

Every heart is by nature defiled and yields only evil. The Pharisees and scribes lived as if something else defiled people. They had asked Jesus why his disciples ate without washing their hands, against the tradition of the elders, thinking this defiled them (7:1–5). They believed and lived as if what defiled a person is what goes into him, like the right foods eaten the right ways, which are really mere outward works, even those invented by man instead of those commanded by God. They taught others to do the same, profaning the name of God among us.

Jesus corrected the crowd’s false belief out of tender love for them. He had quoted Isaiah to the scribes and Phari-sees to call out their hypocrisy:

***“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (7:6).*** He teaches the crowd that ***“there is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him” (v 15).***

Jesus did not want the crowd misled by the moralism of the Pharisees. Jesus corrected the disciples’ false belief to prepare them to teach others the same. He teaches the disciples that it is not what goes into a person that defiles him, since what goes in enters not the heart but the stomach and exits to the latrine. It is what comes out of a person that defiles him, because ***“from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts”*** and so much more (v 21). Original sin causes actual sins. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. And this is true of us all, save Christ.

The catalogue of vices describes what flows from the defiled heart: both actions that can reoccur (sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness) and attitudes that relate to those actions (deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness).

However, God creates new, clean hearts in us through Christ by his Spirit-filled Gospel. This clean heart has existed only in one man: the God-man, Jesus Christ. His heart was pure and holy, since he is God's Son made flesh from the virgin Mary (Luke 1:35). From his heart came forth love for both God and man, fulfilling God's Law for our sakes (Galatians 4:4–5). From his heart flowed water and blood as he was pierced for our defiled hearts (John 19:34), cleansing us by his atoning blood. This shows us the Father's heart of love for us, that he gave his only Son into death for our sin (Romans 8:32).

Through the Spirit-filled Gospel, God gives us what Jesus gained on the cross. Christ rose and sent the Holy Spirit to take what is his and ***“declare it to you”*** (John 16:14).

So, all Jesus accomplished with his holy heart, the Spirit now declares to be ours. By the Gospel, he washes us thoroughly from our iniquity and cleanses us from our sin, making us whiter than snow and creating in us a clean heart.

In the watery Gospel, Holy Baptism, he gave us ***“the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life”*** (Titus 3:5–7, Ezekiel 36:25).

Through faith alone, our hearts are newly created by this Spirit-filled Gospel (Acts 15:9). Through faith, we receive and benefit from what Christ gained in his life, death, and resurrection and what the Spirit gives us in the Gospel. This faith God gives us as a gift of his grace alone (Ephesians 2:8).

With such hearts, we can approach God's throne of grace and ***“draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water”*** (Hebrews 10:22).

Then, with our newly created hearts, we bear fruit by the strength God alone gives. We must remember that our sinful hearts were not removed in Baptism but remain in us until we die. So, in spite of our faith and sanctified good intentions, those evil thoughts and that catalogue of vices will continually seek to defile our hearts (Romans 7:18–19). But we return to the cleansing of our baptism by confessing our sins and receiving in faith the absolution: ***“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”*** (1 John 1:9).

As we return regularly to ***“stand firm”*** in this (Ephesians 6:13), sin will not rule over our hearts (Romans 6:14), but the Holy Spirit will ***“renew a right spirit within”*** us routinely (Psalm 51:10). And our newly purified hearts are zealous for good works (Titus 2:14).



Just as evil thoughts flow from the defiled heart, so ***“the springs of life”*** (Proverbs 4:23) and ***“fruit of the Spirit”*** (Galatians 5:22–23) flow from the heart that’s cleansed by the Spirit-filled Gospel. But we do not look to our hearts to decide what good works are, since our defiled hearts would deceive us with a defiled understanding and will. Instead, God prepared for us beforehand what those good works are to be (Ephesians 2:10). They are done according to his Law and lived out in our assorted stations in life within the three estates, as Scripture teaches.

Our strength for these works of love comes only from the heart purified by Jesus’ blood (Hebrews 9:14). Paul sums it up: ***“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith”*** (1 Timothy 1:5). So, find strength in the purifying blood of Jesus. Once shed. Continually given in his Supper. For you. And you have a defiled heart made clean and fruitful once more.

“Just follow your heart”? No, that’s not our creed. **“Create in me a clean heart, O God.”** That’s more like it. That’s relying on God’s grace in Christ, looking outside ourselves to his work and Word. And that leaves us with a heart cleansed in the flood of Jesus’ blood, bringing us to sing: **By grace! On this I’ll rest when dying; In Jesus’ promise I rejoice; For though I know my heart’s condition, I also know my Savior’s voice. My heart is glad, all grief has flown, Since I am saved by grace alone.** (LSB 566:6)

Amen