

September 1, 2024

A Defiled Heart

Scripture Reading:

Mark 7:1-23

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 wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash, and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups and pots and bronze kettles and beds.) ⁵ So 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?” 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.’

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

⁹ Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But 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), ¹² then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³ thus nullifying the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

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

¹⁷ When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ He said to them, “So, are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹ since it enters not the heart but the stomach and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking?

As I read through this passage my mind immediately drifted to the word purity. They Pharisees are acting like purity police, questioning the practices of Jesus' disciples. Today we often associate this push for purity with our more conservative and evangelical siblings and attempts to impose one understanding of what it means to uphold Biblical values and teachings. Seeing the harm and trauma caused by this narrow interpretation of scripture, we as progressive Christians tend to reject values and Biblical interpretations that impinge upon human rights and human flourishing and have a broader interpretation of what it means to love our neighbor. We often associate legalism with conservative Christians and love with progressive Christians, just like we tend to associate legalism with the Pharisees and inclusive love with Jesus. But maybe it is more complicated than that. Progressive Christians can also get caught up in the push for purity.

My husband came home from work one day in a huff. He said, "I had a woman yell at me today because we were using macaroni for a VBS craft project." Now I don't know if she really yelled at him or not – that is what he says about me when I speak emphatically to him – but hey, it's his story. Anyway...she was upset because food was being wasted and how can we waste food like that, or model that, when so many people in our world are food insecure?

My husband's response was, "seriously?" It seemed a bit extreme to him. Bewildered, he said, "Now I have to worry about an 89-cent bag of macaroni?" He wasn't having it.

Had she not been so confrontational, he might have given her concern some consideration, but because it felt like an attack, he stopped listening.

I was once in a meeting where a young man, new to the group, finally decided to share. He made the grave error of using the word, "mankind," as he courageously shared his thoughts. Before he even got to the end of his sentence, two different people blurted, "It's 'humankind,' we don't say 'mankind.' We use inclusive language here." In an instant, he shut down. He didn't say another word and he bolted for the door the second the meeting was over. Never to be seen again.

I was helping to plan an event for a church and suggested passing out colorful plastic leis for everyone – just for fun. I was told, in no uncertain terms, we could not do that because that was cultural appropriation.

Really?

There is so much to navigate! Inclusive language, colonial thinking, microaggressions, privilege, injustice, human rights, trauma, the environment, racism, and all the other isms. Trying to live and act in such a way as to cause no harm is daunting, maybe even impossible. And yet, if you care about how your words, actions and lifestyle impact others, you care about all these things. You can care so much that you can become as self-righteous as those you accuse of being self-righteous.

With all of this to figure out, you can see why some people throw up their hands and say in disgust, “I don’t care! I’ll say what I want to say. I’ll do what I want to do. People need to stop being snowflakes!”

Every day we make choices, and those choices impact others. But choosing to stand for human rights may mean giving up Chick Filet’, Hobby Lobby, Home Depot, and Lowes, a few companies that actively lobby against LGBTQ+ community. It might mean boycotting companies that exploit labor...ugh! But where does it end? How can someone who is trying to be a good neighbor manage all of this? How are we supposed to keep up? It’s macaroni on steroids!

Can anyone truly be pure?

Years ago, when our daughter was in middle school, we got into a conversation about how everything is tainted with something impure – I might have even used the word sin. I was making the point that it is impossible to be perfectly pure. She was eating a banana and she looked at me incredulously and said, “I suppose you are going to tell me that there is something wrong with me eating this banana?” “Well,” I replied, “as a matter of fact, yes.” I went on to tell her about multinational corporations, like United Fruit, which later became Chiquita, forced peasants off their subsistence farms and turned them into laborers who can’t afford to feed their families AND use pesticides and chemicals that hurt people and the environment in places like Guatemala. I’m not sure she even let me finish my speech before she stormed off in a huff.

Fast forward six years. Milissa is a college student at Texas Christian University. I don’t know what class she was taking that prompted her call, but she left a message on our answering machine that said, “I get the banana.” It’s one of our favorite family stories.

Today she is a professional in the apparel industry and wrestles with the labor practices of the companies that make the products she sells. She still “gets” the banana; she also needs to make a living.

I had a wonderful conversation the other day with a woman who does spiritual direction for social activists. She talked about the mental anguish that can occur for people trying to do what they do with integrity. It is impossible to be pure and hypocrisy not to be.

When we read stories about Jesus clashing with Pharisees, it is easy to reduce the Pharisees to a bunch of legalistic hypocrites who care about rules more than people, and purity more than praxis. It's easy to do, but wrong.

AJ Levine is a retired Jewish professor of the New Testament. One of her passion projects is addressing antisemitism in Christian preaching. Her work humbles me. She has heard too many sermons by well-meaning Christian preachers where Pharisees are maligned, and by default, associated with all Jews. She co-authored a book on the Pharisees to help promote better preaching and better understanding of Judaism in the time of Jesus.

She notes that just like Christians today, Jewish people in Jesus' time were diverse and reflected a wide range of practices and beliefs. We see that diversity as Jesus and his followers clash with the Pharisees. According to Levine, Pharisees are best understood as reformers, we might even call them progressives. They were popular among the Jewish people. "The Pharisees encouraged the Jewish people to increase the sanctity of their lives and fully to be a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).

Several things made the Pharisees respected teachers for Jews:

- Their concern for practice
- Their flexibility in Torah interpretation
- Their living among the people
- Their reputation for living simply rather than ostentatiously¹

Levine writes: "Being intentional regarding diet and dress, observing the Sabbath, engaging in forms of worship, sanctifying daily life—concerns of the Pharisees and of the broader Jewish community—should be looked at not in terms of legal minutiae, but in terms of personal and communal spirituality, multiculturalism, resistance to Roman desires for empire-wide homogeneity. These practices helped the Jewish people to survive over two thousand years."²

This clash between Jesus and the Pharisees is strategically placed in the gospel of Mark. It happens right before Jesus extends his ministry to the Gentiles and this may

¹ <https://www.fromthedesk.org/misunderstanding-the-pharisees-amy-jill-levine/>

² ibid

explain why they are portrayed in a negative way. The inclusion of Gentiles poses a threat to the identity of Judaism that the Pharisees were trying to preserve.

What I recognize in our passage for today is that Jesus and the Pharisees represent different understandings of what it means to be holy and distinct as God's light in the world. We don't need to condemn the Pharisees to be able to hear Jesus' message for us.

Jesus does not diminish the Pharisees concerns, but he does point out their own hypocrisy. And we don't know why the disciples weren't washing their hands, maybe they had a good reason. Maybe this is just another way of Jesus saying, "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." (John 8:7) Or "take the log out of your own eye before you try to remove the speck out of your neighbor's eye." (Matthew 7:3-5)

We can do the right things for the wrong reasons. We can also do wrong things because we don't know they are wrong. And we can be torn and conflicted about doing the right thing when it there is no purely right thing. This is life. There is no way to live it purely or perfectly. The Apostle Paul once wrote, "the very things I hate I end up doing!" (Romans 7:15) It's not an excuse. And it certainly isn't permission to do as we please. It is a common struggle for those who have a conscience, which the Pharisees had, and Jesus' followers had.

Jesus understands how dizzying this can be. So he shifts the focus to motives and intentions. He shifted the focus to the heart. "It's what comes out of a person that defiles," says Jesus. "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come."

So...how's your heart? Perhaps it is time for a check-up.

It takes some serious self-reflection to assess why you do what you do. Sometimes people recognize heart problems in us before we do.

In the weeks to come, we will continue to consider matters of the heart. For now - complicated as life is – may our hearts be God-filled.

Psalms 139 concludes with this prayer – it seems a fitting way to conclude this sermon:

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;

test me and know my thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any wicked way in me,

and lead me in the way everlasting. Amen.

Note to reader: Our communion hymn for this Sunday was the perfect conclusion for this sermon. I have pasted the words below to "These I Lay Down," found in the Chalice Hymnal #391, by John Bell 1989.

Verse 1

Before I take the body of my Lord
Before I share His life in bread and wine
I recognize the sorry things within
These I lay down

Verse 2

The words of hope I often failed to give
The prayers of kindness buried by my pride
The signs of care I argued out of sight
These I lay down

Verse 3

The narrowness of vision and of mind
The need for other folk to serve my will
And every word and silence meant to hurt
These I lay down

Verse 4

Of those around in whom I meet my Lord
I ask their pardon and I grant them mine
That every contradiction to Christ's peace
Might be laid down

Verse 5

Lord Jesus Christ companion at this feast
I empty now my heart and stretch my hands
And ask to meet You here in bread and wine
Which You lay down