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St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
2100 16<sup>th</sup> Street SW  
Austin, MN 55912-1749  
Pastor Ted Barthels  
Sermon preached on  
September 2, 2018  
15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 4:1,2,6-8; Ephesians 6:10-20  
Hymns: 227; 380; 398; 399:3

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord  
and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. <sup>3</sup>For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash *their* hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup>*When they come* from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, *like* the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.

<sup>5</sup>Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?”

<sup>6</sup>He answered and said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:

‘This people honors Me with *their* lips,  
But their heart is far from Me.

<sup>7</sup>And in vain they worship Me,

Teaching *as* doctrines the commandments of men.’

<sup>8</sup>For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.”

<sup>14</sup>When He had called all the multitude to *Himself*, He said to them, “Hear Me, everyone, and understand: <sup>15</sup>There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things

which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. ...

<sup>21</sup> For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, <sup>22</sup> thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within and defile a man.” (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Criticism

People can be so critical. One of the points that has to be made in pastoral marriage counseling is that couples need to endeavor to stop the criticism! Immediately a defense is made by one or the other spouse that they only want to make their spouse a better person, but all too often what it is in reality is a tearing down of the one you are supposed to be building up. That doesn't mean that all criticism is bad, but so often it only tears down, it fails to edify or to build up: that is to express appreciation, to point out value, to bring suggestions for improvement, strengthen the other person.

Criticism is apparent throughout our text this morning. The Pharisees were sharply critical of Jesus' disciples, endeavoring not only to publicly embarrass them, but at the same time to diminish Jesus in the eyes of the people. Jesus' response was frank and critical of the Pharisees and their false religious philosophy which lay at the heart of their criticism. What it all came down to was whether one was in fact clean or unclean. So we see the need to --

**THEME: Clean Up Your Act!**

However, doing this we need to proceed properly,

**I. Not the World's Way.**

The Pharisees very clearly demonstrate the vanity of the world's way of attempting to achieve spiritual cleanness.

**Mark 7:1-5** “Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. <sup>3</sup> For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash *their* hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup> *When they come* from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, *like* the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches. <sup>5</sup> Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?’ ”

We need to remember the elevated status of the Pharisees within Jewish society. They were not perceived as “the bad guys” as we might automatically think of them. They were highly respected and seen by all people as being not only very religious, but very good, the kind of people that were held up as examples for children or even wayward adults to emulate. The Pharisee’s lifestyle was very disciplined, following many detailed tenets of the Jewish faith, and this included special washings, not only of one’s hands but also of many different vessels that might be used for serving food or beverages. However, these special ceremonial washings were not prescribed by God through Moses, nor were they asked for in any other scripture. They were developed down through the years as different rabbis and scribes debated the fulfillment of the law, and how one could gain greater assurance that one was achieving the best possible fulfillment of every ceremonial law. If God asked us to do this, than it stands to reason that if we do a little more, and add to the law that would be even better and more god-pleasing. Then we would achieve greater righteousness!

Ultimately was assumed that if one did not follow these extra regulations developed over recent centuries than one was less righteousness, and falling short of what was expected.

The thing is, that kind of thinking has a certain appeal to man’s pride. It still sounds reasonable. And so they had all kinds of rules and regulations that either extended the ceremonial law of the Lord, or made room for evading certain inconvenient regulations. It was all written and codified in books included in the Talmud,

not the inspired Holy Scriptures, but rather books of commentary and religious ponderings, very similar to many of the spiritual self-help books sold in Christian bookstores today.

That was the standard the disciples were failing to fulfill as they picked up and ate a chunk of bread without going through the motions of this special ornate hand washing ceremony. And the scribes and Pharisees all thought: “Aha! These men are unclean!” And they found fault! They concluded, “This Jesus and His disciples need to ‘*clean up their act!*’ ”

And so today in America’s religious atmosphere there are many who are critical of those who are now Jesus’ disciples that is those who **today** follow Jesus in their hearts and lives. There are many highly thought of religious figures who find fault with confessional Lutherans because we don’t join in public prayers with people of varying and not even always Christian faiths. They find fault with those who stand by what Scripture says about the sanctity of human life, beginning at conception, and including issues surrounding end of life in sickness or old age. They find fault for refusing to join hands with false teaching churches in their charitable ministries, like the Salvation Army or the unionistic Habitat for Humanity. They find fault for not embracing others in their sin, rather than calling for repentance that they might be delivered from sin. They find fault for confessionally abiding by the Word of the Lord, which is often out of step with current social values.

They appear righteous with their fancy churches and auditoriums, with their clerical colors and fancy robes. They are admired by many, and considered authorities on things spiritual by the media. But how does this all appear to the Lord? Jesus was clear that this type of approach to religion is a fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

**Mark 7:6-8** He answered and said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:

‘This people honors Me with *their* lips,  
But their heart is far from Me.

<sup>7</sup>And in vain they worship Me,

Teaching *as* doctrines the commandments of men.’

<sup>8</sup>For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.”

“Hypocrite” is not a word to be used lightly, and Jesus does not use it here casually. He characterizes the Pharisees as hypocrites because their religion was focused on appearances. They praised the Lord with their lips, but they considered themselves righteous because of their fine deeds and extra works. Their worship was vain and empty because they disregarded the Word of the Lord in preference for the tradition and custom of man. They deemed their way as superior to the way of the Lord! People were impressed; “Ah! Look at how religious the Pharisees are!”

That is what goes on today. People make their own rules for practicing religion and set aside the Word of the Lord, but the world is so impressed with how loving and accepting, and open and good and understanding these religious figures are! But their worship is empty when they have set aside the Word of the Lord and they seek to make themselves clean with their own rules and practices. Their worship is empty because “whatever is not from faith is sin.” (Romans 14:23) Their worship is empty because there is no righteousness within us that avails before God. Isaiah also said, “*All our righteousnesses, (ALL our righteousnesses) are like filthy rags,*” (Isaiah 64:6) disgusting filthy rags. How can one “clean up” when what one uses for such cleaning is so thoroughly filthy?

The world’s way doesn’t work, can’t work. There is no way to clean up our act to clean up our hearts and lives --

## II. But the Lord’s Way.

The Lord starts with an accurate presentation of the source of our uncleanness.

**Mark 7:14-15, 21-23** “When He had called all the multitude to *Himself*, He said to them, ‘Hear Me, everyone, and understand: <sup>15</sup>There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man ... <sup>21</sup>For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, <sup>22</sup>thefts,

covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within and defile a man.”

The original purpose of the ceremonial law was to serve as a reminder for the people of Israel that they were contaminated by sin which brought death. So contact with death and blood and certain diseases like leprosy, brought *ceremonial* uncleanness, serving as reminders of the corrupting power of sin which brought death and all evil into the world. Yes, they were continually reminded of their need for cleansing, but the ceremony or the ritual, or even the animal sacrifice did not provide real cleansing. The entire ceremonial law pointed ahead to the source of real cleansing in the Messiah who was to come into the world. It all pointed to Jesus.

Why was this necessary? Because the natural inclination of man is to minimize his own uncleanness. We all want to point the finger somewhere else as the source of our uncleanness. That started with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden blaming one another and the serpent, ultimately God for the fall into sin. Jesus pointed to the heart of man. “Out of the heart of men proceed evil thoughts.” (v.21) The list goes on and on and we don’t want to hear it, but it flows from your heart too as well as my own, so hear the list and again, and know the source of **your** uncleanness! “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, <sup>22</sup>thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup>**All** these evil things come from **within** and **defile** a man.” (v. 21-23) And we read in the book of Job: “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one!” (Job 14:4)

So, since “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth,” (Genesis 8:21) and we have been brought forth in iniquity and have been infected by sin since our conception within our mother’s womb, (Psalm 51:5) then how shall we be made clean? We despair of our own righteousness, and turn to the righteousness of Christ. What the Pharisees missed or disregarded in all the Old Testament law and prophets is the true source of cleansing power that comes to us from God. God declared through Isaiah: “*Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are*

*red like crimson, They shall be as wool.*” (Isaiah 1:18) How is such cleansing possible? By the cleansing power of Jesus’ blood; *“the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”* (1John 1:7) It is the holy precious blood of Christ that redeems us from sin and death. It is the holy precious blood of Christ that atones for our sins. It is the powerful working of the Holy Spirit calling us to faith in this wonder of grace that leads us back to God in peace, and unites us with our Father in heaven. While our sin alienated us from God, *“we were reconciled us to God through the death of His Son.”* (Romans 5:10)

This entire lesson is about a proper response to that call for us to clean up our act! In that first chapter of John’s first epistle it is spelled out for us so clearly. *““If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* (1 John 1:8-9)

As we confess our own uncleanness and turn away from sin and the evil of this world, and God is faithful and just to forgive for Jesus’ sake, and Jesus’ blood cleanses us from all unrighteousness. What a wonder of grace and love is poured out upon us from heaven above! David knew this grace of God’s full and free forgiveness, and he knew its power. He called upon God to use that power to cleanse his heart. Again and again we sing these precious words in prayer. May those words flow always from hearts filled with love and gratitude to our Savior God. *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a right spirit within me.”* (Psalm 51:10 KJV)

**AMEN.**

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans15:13)