

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

1 So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, **but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.**

6 You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" 7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? 8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? 9 But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—

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

1 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 thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live 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."**

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."

21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness,



envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Wash your hands, my mother would say.

It is a human custom ... motivated by fear of catching germs and disease; and the the instinct for cleanliness (Isn't that next to godliness?).

Jesus protests against human customs being given the weight of divine law, while the essence of God's law is ignored.

True uncleanness comes not from external things, but from the intentions of the human heart.

Today we look at our ongoing tension of living with the Law of God and the challenge of the Gospel. We understand that Jesus integrated the law and gospel for us to live with – in our human condition.

Jesus is concerned with the heart, that is that inner self that animates and motivates our actions. Intention, Jesus says, is what makes one clean or unclean. Mark's gospel reports that Jesus breaks the letter of the law to uphold its spirit.

Objections to the way Jesus does and does not observe the law grow until these controversies overtake Jesus and his critics put him to death.

God raises Jesus to new life, giving some sort of divine approval to Jesus' way of not observing the law. Jesus is the heart of it all.

One point of this lesson is: rather than examining their own hearts, the Pharisees want to examine the hearts of others. Not so much unlike the way we live.

The Pharisees were looking for a reason to dismiss these people, rather than looking for a reason to welcome them. And they are using God to do it. This action or intention initiates Jesus' rebuke of their teaching.

Discerning the work and faith of those dirty hands and hearts should come first, Jesus says. How **often do we** engage in snap judgments about people without first knowing their hands, let alone their hearts? How often do we use God to dismiss them?

Luther struggled with this tension between the Law and the Gospel. He said:

At an earlier time there was no pleasure in the law for me. But now I find that the law is good and tasty, that it has been given to me so that I might live, and now I find my pleasure in it. Earlier, it told me what I ought to do. Now I begin to adapt myself to it. And for this I worship, praise, and serve God. —Martin Luther



Luther found purpose in the law.

Luther describes these *three uses of the law*.

Luther's first use of the law describes law as a **curb**: law for the sake of good order and well-being in our societies.

Our modern laws work similarly. Our traffic laws keep us in the proper lane, help traffic run smoothly, and prevent accidents, for example. We can look to certain biblical rules and see similar good reasons for keeping them.

Which brings us to the second use of the law, the law as a **mirror**: law as the perfect reflection of the human heart and the sin within. Responding to the charges of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus points out that true sin comes from within. Our intentions condemn us just as much as our actions do. No one can claim to be without sin under this light. James uses the metaphor of the mirror in the epistle reading for today.

Sin is the only theological point that need not be proven; we all know it all too well. To name sin does not destroy us. Instead it leads us to the acknowledgment that only grace can save us—a grace Jesus freely and readily provides.

Finally there is Luther's third use of the law: the law **as guide**. Freed by Christ from the power of the law to condemn us, we are able to live out the law in a new kind of way—with pure intention and with joy. James's vision of the acts of true Christians: generous giving, good listening, exhibiting patience and meekness, as well as care for the needy (like widows and orphans) is an example of this use of the law.

The law becomes, in Luther's terms, "good and tasty." Most Christians can relate to feelings of satisfaction that come through service, the calm that comes from doing the right thing, and worship and praise that come **not out** of obligation but out of pure joy.

We, who are unclean (we, who have dirty hands) need to remember to look in the mirror and reflect on our intentions.

We must discover (again and again) our opportunity to speak a word of forgiveness, love, and mercy. Jesus urges us to remember that impurity is a matter of the heart, not the mouth. And that impurity dwells in all of us.



Whom do we consider “unclean” today? From whom do we try to keep a safe distance?

We have been taught to distance ourselves from the Pharisees and scribes, yet perhaps we have more in common with them than we thought. We understand, like the Pharisees, that being called by God is a gift. In response to God’s grace, we want to live in the ways God would want us to live, and we try to discern what that means in the concrete circumstances of our daily lives. The problem is that *as we are attempting to live faithfully*, there is always the temptation to judge those who do not live in the same way, to set ourselves above others. Perhaps we are even tempted to believe that somehow we are more “deserving” of God’s love and grace than others.

Have we lost the whole point of faithfulness. Jesus tells us to beware when piety gets in the way of fulfilling the heart of the law: loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself. He warns us to beware when our piety separates us from others, for then it is also separating us from God.

Nothing outside of us can defile us by going in, Jesus says.

Jesus warns, what comes out of our hearts can defile our lives and do great harm to others -- evil intentions, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly (Mark 7:20-23).

No law or tradition can protect us from the darkness that lurks within our own hearts. We can try to project a squeaky clean image, but one way or another, the evil within will find its way out. The highly edited version of ourselves, the façade that we present to the world, will crumble sooner or later.

While this passage is heavy on law, there is gospel here too.

This text shows us that Jesus sees clearly the ugliness of human hearts, yet he does not turn away. He sees right through our highly edited versions of ourselves, knows what lurks in our hearts, **yet loves us still**. In the larger story of the Gospel, he shows us what true faithfulness is by

- daring to touch those considered unclean, by



- daring to love those who are social outcasts, by
- loving and serving and giving his life for all people – tax collectors and sinners, lepers and demon-possessed, scribes and Pharisees, you and me.

This good news exerts a claim on our lives, a call to follow. Following Jesus is not about separating ourselves from those considered less holy or unclean. Following Jesus means that like him, we get our hands dirty serving others, caring especially for those whom the world has cast aside. True faithfulness is not about clean hands, but a heart cleansed and a life shaped by the radical, self-giving love of God in Christ.

We work daily in the garden of the world and get our hands dirty ... doing God's work with our hands. Let's remember to wash are hands, for the right reason.

