

Christ's Cleansing Is More Than Skin Deep

Mark 7:1-23 • 2021-09-05



It's a sad and crippling condition. It causes the parent of a newborn to hourly sanitize every toy and wipe down every surface with disinfectant. It makes some paralyzed with paranoia. It's called mysophobia: the pathological fear of contamination. It's commonly called "germaphobia." And it's related to hypochondria—a constant fear that one will succumb to a sickness. You might have seen the joke that depicts how you can grow out of this phobia. There's a mother pictured with her child and he's wearing goggles, rubber gloves, and has bumper pads on his knees and elbows. Every surface is sparkly clean. The caption reads, "Your first child." The caption on the next picture reads, "After your second child." That picture shows a group of kids all covered in dirt. One looks like he's eating it. The mom is acting all cool and collected as she's changing a stinky diaper in the background. The good little dog is sharing his dish with the curious toddler. Germs of course are no laughing matter. They can be deadly. It can be a struggle to properly balance your care. On the one hand you can't run around with disinfectant spray covering everything everywhere you go. On the other hand, you can't get so careless that no one knows where the garbage pile at your home begins or ends. A different type of ailment can also plague us. Have you ever wondered, "What if I'm not quite clean before God?" Listen as we read from Mark 7. Jesus helps us see that spiritual cleanliness goes further than just skin deep.

Jesus' disciples were committing a dirty mistake—at least one which his enemies quickly noticed. "*Why are your disciples eating with unwashed hands and not holding to the traditions of the elders?*" Ceremonial washing was not uncommon for ancient Israel. The priests that came near the altar and approached God's tabernacle were instructed to wash his hands in a large ceremonial basin. Several other laws from God dealt with cleansing. Some apparently did have hygienic purposes such as removing mold growth in homes. But all these washings and laws given by God did indeed have an important overarching purpose: it taught the people. It helped them to see that they were not to remove mold and things by superstitious incantations. And it helped them understand the need to be clean as you approach a holy God. All these types of washings were God-given.

But was there ever any divine mandate for hand washing before a meal? No. This practice was described by Mark as, "*a tradition of the elders.*" It wasn't God's law.

But it remained a tradition highly regarded by all. Mark notes all the Jews observed it. And the Pharisees championed and upheld this ceremony. And Jesus knew they had elevated this man-made tradition in order to offer lip service to God. "*Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.'*"

Lip service was only half the problem; they also watered down the real law. Jesus continues "*You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.*" How were they letting go of God's commands? Man-made rules and the traditions of men are easy to keep in outward fashion. We see that in churches today. One false church today takes on the name Christian and says that you are forbidden to drink coffee. But they've only created an easy check-list item which they can cross off and pat themselves on the back and say, "I'm God's friend. I obey." And others wrongly teach things like, "it is sinful to have a television; it is sinful to drink alcohol; and you're not a real Christian unless you give this much money to church and charity." Human rules take over and people let go of God's laws.

Why does this happen? We are tempted to think that we have some sort of spiritual checklist that makes us clean. "I've had good manners all week. Check. I've given my offering. Check. I've kept my membership in one of the most conservative Christian churches in town. Check. I've not sworn. Not smoked. I've said fifteen prayers today – I hope God has his tally marks down for each one!"

Do good manners before men make us clean before God? Does God ever indicate that a clean and well-dressed family in the pew is a clean and well-dressed family in spirit? Does prayer cleanse the mouth that speaks? What does it take to be clean? Not a checklist. Not a routine. The Jews who thought that ceremonial washing was making God happy and themselves clean missed out on the law of God. And instead of looking at their own hearts they were looking at what the hands of everyone else was doing. And how easy it can be to point out when others fail the rules of men! "He didn't put on a good outward show like me."

But going through the motions to check off our cleaning list can't ever make us clean. Jesus called the crowd together to give the real dirt on cleanliness before God, "*Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.*" Jesus further explained to the twelve in private: "*What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.*"

The heart matters! It is the source of all ugly, filthy evil. What good is it if you attend worship and are physically present but inside you're thinking, "I can't wait until this five stanza hymn is over!" What good is the gospel preached

if instead of drawing near to listen you are thinking, “Why should I be listening to my pastor if he is going to preach this long?” What good is giving an offering to God if the heart greedily thinks, “I hope God knows how hard it is for me to give this!” What good is coming to the Lord’s supper if you leave it foolishly thinking, “Now I’m clean because I did something for my God.” What good is bringing your infant to baptism if it becomes a tradition that relies on the deed rather than that recognizes the gift and nourishes that faith given by the Spirit? The heart is tainted.

There’s usually not that much weight or significance in the number of various things listed in the Bible. Sometimes it’s clear that there is. As Jesus goes on to list the sins that flow from the heart, I can’t help but stop and count them. As he speaks now alone to his twelve disciples, he names off twelve different sins that flow out of the heart. I have to wonder. Did he glance at each of his own disciples and give them each a reminder of the sin which lurked within? Did he hit a pet sin for each of them which they each personally struggled with? We do know that at least one of them struggled with theft. More than one had a struggle with the sin of arrogance. Were Jesus to speak these words as you stood there with the twelve which one would make you feel the most uncomfortable, the most exposed?

You can put on a show but is your heart really clean? Soon one is left with the Psalmist saying “Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.” (Psalm 24) In fear sometimes we are left to wonder, “Am I really clean?”

I once worked at a cheese factory. Most of the time I was working on the line with the packaging process. But sometimes, when production had to halt on my line, my job shifted to cleaning duty. Cleaning never stopped in that factory. That’s because all it would take to bring great ruin to the company was one bad package, one contaminant, one sickness traced back to our factory. We couldn’t allow for even one bacteria colony to multiply and take hold of our production. And the danger was never in the way things simply looked. Everything could look as clean as Mr. Clean’s kitchen. But if there was a microscopic contaminant—everything was ruined. Outward cleanliness means nothing if we still have the unseen enemy lurking within. Our enemy, the devil, seeks to entice our hearts to sin. He wants us to be content to merely appear clean on the outward surface. He seeks to drag us to hell by inward rotteness nicely covered with outward deeds. That’s what Jesus once called, “white-washed dead-man’s tombs.”

What does it mean to be spiritually clean? We are fooling ourselves if we think it is done by human hands. I invite you to open your Bibles to Psalm 51. David’s sin started with an unclean heart—evil thoughts and lust. He thought he could cover it up. He reasoned that if he wasn’t caught outwardly in the act and nobody knew about it then he was still clean. Everyone would think him clean. But God knew. When David’s sin was exposed, he wrote, “*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*” He understood the cleansing could not come by his own hands. He needed the Lord to wash and cleanse him from his sin. So do we!

To cleanse us from sin the Son of God was sent to this world. And his hands were soiled by dirt and carried germs. But his hands remained perfectly innocent of all wrong. It was not a heart like ours. Out of his heart only came goodness and truth. He was tempted but remained pure in heart. He lived as the holy Son of God who was born of the virgin and conceived by the Holy Spirit. He came the Son of God in human flesh and with a beating heart.

And why did he take on flesh? So that his hands could be bound, and he could face trial in our place. The Pharisees were so concerned with ceremonial cleanliness that day that they wouldn’t even enter into the palace of Pilate, a Gentile, lest they get contaminated. But at the same time Pilate washed his hands of Jesus they all cried together “let his blood be on ours.” And the first to likely be covered by his blood were those whipping his back or pounding in the nails in his hands. But his life was given in place of ours. His punishment took our place. In order to cleanse us from our evil hearts he faced the greatest curse and poured out his blood. It is by his holy blood which he shed on the cross that we are cleansed.

From this cleansing sacrifice came the world’s only hope for true holiness. Rising to life he sent his powerful sin-cleansing gospel out to the world. His messengers declared with God’s authority, “*Be baptized and wash your sins away!*”(Acts 22) In the water and the Word he gives us his Spirit and a new heart of faith. The apostle Peter reminds us of the real power in the washing is in the promise of God baptism is “*Not the removal of dirt from the body, but the seal of a good conscience before God.*” (1 Peter 3:21) And the apostle Paul’s description of baptism “*Christ cleansed us by the washing with water through the word to make us holy.*”(Eph 5) And further we also read, “*He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*”(Titus 3) You have been born again by the gospel—given a new heart of faith forgiven of sin.

That is the cleansing which lasts forever. There’s a picture of heaven in Scripture. It’s really clean there! It is there that the saints stand in glory and wear spotless clothes. And the explanation of that beautiful scene is simply this: “*These are those who have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb.*”(Revelation 7) This is what God tells us as he speaks of his cleansing for us, “*Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.*”(Isaiah 1)

What does it take to be spiritually clean? Christ. And his cleansing is more than skin deep.