

DIRTY HANDS, CLEAN HEARTS
Sermon for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, 2021
Mark 7:1-13

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel read before, Mark 7:1-13: ¹ **The Pharisees and some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus.** ² **They saw that some of His disciples were eating their food with ‘defiled’ hands, that is, without washing them.** ³ **For the Pharisees, like all other Jews, do not eat without washing their hands up to the wrist, to follow the tradition of their elders.** ⁴ **When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat without first washing, and there are many other things that they have had handed on to them and observe, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, brass pots and couches.** ⁵ **The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him: “Why do Your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders but eat bread with defiled hands?”**

⁶ **He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites, as the Scriptures say: ‘This people honours Me with its lips, but its hearts are far from Me.** ⁷ **They worship Me in vain, since what they teach as doctrines are the commandments of men.’** ⁸ **You have abandoned the Commandment of God but hold on to the tradition of men.”**

⁹ **He told them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the Commandment of God to establish your own tradition!** ¹⁰ **For Moses said: ‘Honour your father and your mother!’ and ‘Let the person who speaks evil of father or mother be put to death!’** ¹¹ **However, you say, ‘If anyone says to his father or mother, “Anything by which I might have helped you is Corban (that is, a gift to God),”** ¹² **then you do not let him do anything for his father or his mother any longer.** ¹³ **You make the Word of God of no effect by the tradition that you have handed down. You also do many other things like that.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Clean hands are important. In our current climate, with covid 19 hanging over our heads, we see hand sanitisers everywhere we go. Employers have strict policies about hand washing. Yet, who’s to tell us when our hands are truly clean? Scientists, doctors, teachers, parents, employers? Sight, smell, taste? Even the labels on a lot of hand sanitisers don’t say they are 100% effective in killing all germs. Then there are those who argue we’ve so sanitised our world, including our hands, that our children are growing up less healthy than we did, more susceptible to resistant microbes. All of this pales to unimportance, though, when we compare it to the question of a clean heart.

The contrast between Jesus’ reception at the end of Mark chapter 6 and His encounter with the Pharisees and scribes in our passage today which opens chapter 7, *is remarkable*. Jesus had walked through villages, towns, and the countryside. Wherever He went, people would bring their sick to Him for healing. Jesus was even willing to heal those who, in faith, touched the edge of His cloak.¹

Now the contagious excitement about a Jesus who heals all who had come to Him is replaced with a concern about the ritual cleanness of His disciples’ hands. **“The Pharisees and some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus.** ² **They saw that some of His disciples were eating their food with ‘defiled’ hands, that is, without washing them... The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him: “Why do Your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders but eat bread with defiled hands?”**

If you had the opportunity for a private audience with Jesus, would you argue about the proper way to wash up before a meal? It may even be that this was not a matter of the disciples not washing their hands at all, but of not washing their hands thoroughly enough to meet the Pharisees’ standard. Jesus’ opponents seem to have completely lost sight of what really matters before God. The way they asked their question suggests that the root of the problem was that they had begun to put human concerns before and above what was important in God’s eyes. Our initial

¹ Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 5:27-34

sympathy with the Pharisees' concern over clean hands at the table goes right down the drain when we begin to see the real problem in all its seriousness.

When we were little children, we were always told by our mothers to wash behind our ears and between our toes at bath time. To pass "bath-time inspection," we quickly learned that our mothers were not going to check the easy-to-reach obvious places like our hands or bellies. If we wanted to be declared "clean," then we had to make sure we washed thoroughly. Jesus reminds His questioners that they still need to learn this lesson. Centuries before, through His prophet Isaiah, the Lord had tried to teach Israel to check for true cleanness by considering their hearts: **"This people honours Me with its lips, but its hearts are far from Me. ⁷ They worship Me in vain, since what they teach as doctrines are the commandments of men."**

We may make the same mistake they were making if we miss the very important way Jesus introduces this quote from Isaiah. **"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites,"** Jesus says. Right after this, Jesus would speak of the Commandments God had given through Moses and how these ancient words of God should have shaped the lives and thoughts of His hearers. Yet the Pharisees were more concerned about whether people's hands were clean than whether their bodies had been cleansed of disease by the words of Jesus and whether their hearts had been filled with the peace Jesus was proclaiming. That's exactly the sort of thing that happens when we stop asking what's important to God.

We have all heard the expression "lip service" and probably know what it means. No one is impressed by outward professions that are completely unsupported by attitude and action. The Lord's words, both in Isaiah and in Mark, may suggest another image, however, when He speaks of hearts far away. Here we may think of close lips and distant hearts. Have you ever had the uncomfortable or even infuriating experience of someone whom you know inwardly opposes you, yet greets you warmly - even with a handshake, an embrace, or a kiss? We immediately think of the example of the kiss of Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane. Was there ever a case of greater separation between lips and hearts?

But we'd better not answer too quickly. If Isaiah's words are prophesied about us, and if Jesus' warnings speak to us, then we had better examine our own lips and hearts and heads and hands to see how we're doing. Have we lost sight of what's really important? What traditions of men, what traditions of our own, have we let crowd out God's Word from its proper place as the Word that demands our total obedience? In what ways have we ceased to care about the hearts of those around us and taken, instead, to examining the cleanness of their hands?

The proof of the pudding is in the eating - whether your hands are washed or not! The wrongness of the Pharisees' approach is shown in the behaviour that resulted. Replacing God's Word with the word of man, listening to human traditions that establish themselves at the cost of the honour due God's Word, results in a life lived only for self. Our Lord points to one of our most fundamental relationships to make this clear: ⁹ **He told them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the Commandment of God to establish your own tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said: 'Honour your father and your mother!' and 'Let the person who speaks evil of father or mother be put to death!' ¹¹ However, you say, 'If anyone says to his father or mother, "Anything by which I might have helped you is Corban (that is, a gift to God)," ¹² then you do not let him do anything for his father or his mother any longer. ¹³ You make the Word of God of no effect by the tradition that you have handed down. You also do many other things like that."**

When our own voices and no others guide us, when our hearts are filled with self, and far from God, even those dearest to us will suffer the consequences. Instead of gratitude, honour, obedience, and love toward those who have endured pain and deprivation to give us life, we look for excuses and loopholes so that we can be free of the burden of caring for our parents. There was a tradition among the Jews that if you declared some of your money **"Corban (that is, a gift to God)"**, then it was off-limits. The money could not be used for any other purpose. That's fair enough - it is good to set some of our money aside for offerings to God. However, the scribes and Pharisees abused that tradition. If their parents became old and needed their help, they would say they had set their extra money aside as "Corban", and therefore *they could not spend it to help their parents*. That was outrageous, Jesus says. The Pharisees and scribes were circumventing a direct command from God, the Fourth Commandment, *"Honour your father and your mother,"* and they were using a man-made tradition about "Corban" as their excuse. That is the kind of tradition that Jesus condemns, namely, a man-made tradition used to get around a God-given command. Though the particulars of this example may be hard for us to reconstruct, Jesus' concluding **"many other things"** shows that this is merely one

example among many of what life turned in upon itself looks like. The contrast between images and definitions of marriage in our world today and the picture of marriage that Paul gives us in our Second Reading today from Ephesians 5 is just one more example. It's a long list. Our hands may be clean, but our hearts are filthy.

Human traditions may set standards for outward cleanness, but they can never make us clean within. Jesus points out the true source of the Pharisees' uncleanness because He wanted to make them clean. This will be clearly demonstrated in the casting out of the unclean spirit and the compassion Jesus will show the crowds in the accounts that follow our text for today. Jesus seeks to draw our attention away from human traditions, which cannot save us, to focus on God's Word, which can. God's words, spoken to us and for us, expose the "dirt behind our ears," the "dirt" we've been hiding in the hope no one would see, the "dirt" that gets in our eyes and blinds us to the needs of those around us, the "dirt" that clogs our hearts and shuts them down, the "dirt" that kills. But the point of all this is not so God can say, "Look, you're dirty!" Rather, our Lord calls us from human tradition to His Word and His priorities and, through His voice, declares us clean so that He can say, by His death on the cross, "Come to *Me*, and I shall make you clean." Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

O Lord, we thank You for all Your goodness to us, but especially for the gift of Your Word and for the knowledge that we have of You through its message. We thank You for teaching us Your commandments, but, far more, we thank You for showing Yourself and Your limitless grace to us in Jesus Christ Your Son. Enable us to listen to Him in faith and to obey Him in love.

Send forth Your Word into our world today. Open doors of opportunity for us, and equip us to be active witnesses to Your Gospel, so that more and more may come to know Jesus Christ. Sow Your Word in the hearts and minds of people everywhere. Change their blindness to sight. Change their enslavement to sin, Satan, and death into the freedom that Christ alone gives.

Heavenly Father, let Your Word, as a living power, judge the thoughts and desires of our hearts. Increase our knowledge of what is good, and strengthen us to examine ourselves, amend our lives, and give up our pet sins. Grant that, through feeding on Jesus, the Son of Man, we may remain in Him, and He in us, and that, remaining in Him, we may be guided by His Word, and bring forth abundant fruit.

Let Your Word shine in our homes, that parents and children may live together in love, serve one another in kindness, and experience true joy, both in this life and the one to come.

Give the Spirit of Christ to all who are facing sickness, sorrow, hardship or need. Grant that they may find You quick to strengthen and bless them, and lead them to praise You for doing everything well.

Continue to keep us by the power of Your Holy Spirit; comfort us by Your Gospel, and sustain us by Your love.

This we pray in the name of Jesus, who gave Himself for us, that we might live through Him, and praise You for ever and ever. Amen.

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 29:11-19

¹¹ The vision about all this will become like the **words in a sealed scroll** for you. If people give the scroll to a man who can read and tell him, "Please read this!" he answers, "I cannot. For it is **sealed**." ¹² If the **scroll** is given to someone who cannot read, and he is told, "Please read this!" he answers, "I do not know how to read."

¹³ The Lord has said: "Because **this people has been coming near Me with their mouths and has been honouring Me with their lips, while their hearts have been keeping far away from Me, and their**

fear of Me is a commandment of men that has been taught them, ¹⁴ Therefore, look! I shall again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder on wonder. **The wisdom of their wise men will become lost, and the intelligence of their intelligent men will be hidden.**"

¹⁵ How horrible it will be for those who bury their plans deeply to conceal them from the LORD! Their deeds are done in the dark, and they ask, "Who sees us? Who knows us?" ¹⁶ Such is your perversity! Should the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing that is made should say about the one who has made it, "He did not make me," or that **a thing that is shaped**

should **say** about **him who has shaped it**, “He has not been intelligent”? ¹⁷ Is it not just a little while until Lebanon changes into a fertile land, and the fertile land is regarded as a forest? ¹⁸ On that day **the deaf people will hear** the Words of a scroll and, out of gloom and darkness, the eyes of **blind people will** begin to see. ¹⁹ **Humble people** will have joy after joy in the LORD, and the poorest of people will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.”

Ephesians 5:22-33

²² Wives, be subordinate to your own husbands as to the Lord! ²³ For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is also the Head of the church, His body, of which He is the Saviour; ²⁴ but, as the church is subordinate to Christ, so also wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything! ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶ that He might make the church holy, by making her clean with the Washing of water by the Word! ²⁷ He did this that He might present her to Himself as a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle or any other such blemish, but that she might be holy and without fault. ²⁸ In this way husbands also ought to love their own wives, as their own bodies. A man who loves his own wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one has ever hated his own flesh. Rather, everyone feeds his body and treats it tenderly, as Christ also does the church. ³⁰ For we are members of His body. ³¹ **“This is why a man will leave his father and mother and remain united with his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”** ³² This mystery is great. However, I speak of it with reference to Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you husbands should love his own wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Mark 7:1-13

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