Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 6, 2015
9:30 am

Rev. Todd Goldschmidt, Pastor

With God, It's What's Inside That Counts!

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

7 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. 3(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing [baptizing] of cups, pitchers and kettles. b) So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

6He replied, “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. 7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ c

8You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

14Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 15Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’ g”

21For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’ ”
Jesus and His disciples were conducting their outreach efforts in their home region of Galilee. At the time, they were in what was known as “the garden spot of Palestine”—the fertile, well-watered plain of Gennesaret at the north-end of the Sea of Galilee. It was about the mid-point of Jesus’ 3½ year public ministry. His cousin, John the Baptist—who’d served so faithfully and fearlessly as His God-ordained Forerunner—had been beheaded; Jesus had fed the multitudes with a young lad’s meager sack lunch; been rejected at His hometown synagogue in Nazareth; walked on water (as had Peter, until his faith faltered); healed hundreds and raised the dead; preached and taught throughout the land. He was transitioning from a year of growing popularity among the people into a year of intense opposition at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders whose power base was centered around the temple in Jerusalem and in the Jewish Ruling Council or Sanhedrin. The Pharisees and Sadducees were the two chief religious sects at the time.

The left-leaning Sadducees—who didn’t believe in the supernatural, the miraculous or the resurrection of the dead—were paranoid about losing the plum political posts that the ruling Roman governors had appointed them to because of the “cozy” relationship they’d cultivated with them over the years. And although the Old Covenant stipulated that it was God Himself Who was to anoint the high priest, Caesar had usurped that role and handed that office to the Sadducees. The self-righteous, hypocritical Pharisees, on the other hand, were concerned about losing their reputation as the self-appointed experts on interpreting and applying the Law of Moses to the day-to-day doings of the average Israelite. Each group took turns sending out delegations to interrogate Rabbi Jesus, hoping to trap Him into saying or doing something that they deemed blasphemous: an offense against God’s Law that would warrant a death sentence.

This time it was “the Pharisees and teachers of the law” turn to play their devious hand. “The Pharisees and teachers of the law” had “let go of the commands of God and [were] holding on to the traditions of men.” They were only concerned with the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law of love. They’d turned God’s law into their gospel, and His gospel into their law. They were far more concerned about outward appearances than about proclaiming God’s plan of salvation through the ultimate sacrifice of His Son. Jesus teaches them—and us—that with God, it’s what’s inside that counts. Sin comes from the inside, out and not the outside, in. *Sin is who we are by nature.* It’s indelibly stamped on our soul, even after God’s Spirit brings us to put our hope and trust in Jesus.

So when they asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?” He replied, “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 but rules taught by men.’ He added, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” Granted, *most* of the traditions of the elders were built on the foundation of God’s law, to which Jesus was never opposed. In fact, on one occasion He flatly stated: “I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.” That was the key: every sacrifice under the Old Covenant pointed ahead to the all-atoning sacrifice for sin that the Messiah would render in behalf of Israel and all mankind. Jesus of Nazareth was God’s Anointed One; His Messiah—fully God and fully man in One unique Person. Jesus spent every single moment of His earthly life fulfilling His Father’s will perfectly so that He could rescue sinners like you and me from sin, death and hell.
Did you notice that I said that most of the Pharisees traditions were biblical? The rest were simply historical fabrications that over time were viewed as on par with, or even more important than, divine inspiration. And that’s when tradition becomes idolatrous. How different are we from those “Pharisees and teachers of the law” who’d elevated their own interpretations about God’s Word above God’s Word? It’s human nature to take divine principles and use them subjectively to our own advantage as much as possible. Like the Pharisees, we often major on the minors and minor on the majors when it comes to living our lives according to God’s will. “We strain out a gnat and swallow a camel,” just like Jesus accused them of doing, ignoring the law of love.

I confess that it’s easy for me to slip into that mode of thinking, too. We judge by what we see and hear without taking the time required to get to know people for who they really are. Jesus never did that. He always took the time and made the effort to reach out to the neediest folks He encountered during the course of His time on earth: the poor, the blind, lepers and unfortunate souls who were considered “losers” by those who saw themselves as pious Israelites. Such were the “Pharisees and teachers of the law.” Such are we, too often.

Jesus confronts the Pharisees—and us—with a startling truth: The problem of human corruption can’t be cleaned up from the outside. It’s an inward problem. It’s entirely possible for the Pharisees—and us—to discipline ourselves in our prayer habits, eating and drinking patterns, sexual behavior, social graces and generous giving to the extent that we come across as righteous in the eyes of God and man—all the while struggling with monsters of corruption in our thought life. This is the misunderstanding of the Pharisee’s religion and any religion that takes sin seriously. They all attempt to reform the visible result of sin without treating the internal condition. Jesus is the remedy that cleans a person from the inside out by the power of His Holy Spirit—if we allow Him to. The problem many of us have faced—or continue to face—is that we can restrain our outward behavior while retaining all of the evil thoughts within us. What we’ve changed is our appearances, not our hearts. That was the Pharisee’s self-righteous approach to sin.

But it’s not Jesus’ solution for it. An inward problem must be treated with an inward solution. Jesus’ audience in Mark 7 had outward solutions to the problem. Yet their unclean thoughts remained. The same goes for us. Temptation is a struggle for everyone who’s ever tried to live a godly life. Godliness doesn’t come naturally to us and we’re constantly tempted with what does: ambitions, lusts, bad habits, self-interest, conflict and more. The natural self is much harder to live with once we’ve opted not to follow it anymore. It just won’t go away. We can successfully subdue it for a stretch, but those stretches don’t last long. All we have to do is let our guard down and relax for a minute, and it quickly reminds us of the old things it offers and we succumb to their siren song.

Much of “Christian living” literature tries to address this issue, encouraging us to starve the sinful nature, ignore it, rebuke the devil who feeds it or beat it into submission. But there’s a better way that should come before any other option: we should ask God to lead us away from tempting situations. We often determine to subdue the flesh and then live in a climate that cultivates it. We decide to forsake materialism, but then flip thru catalogs that entice us with all sorts of offers. We decide to abandon lust, but watch programs that provoke it. We decide to break a habit of food or drink or other substance, but we don’t rid our environment of it. We want to starve the flesh, but we don’t really want to. Our half-measures avail us nothing. Denial is more than just a river in Egypt.
Jesus gives us the model in the Lord’s Prayer. Ask God to lead you away from temptation. Cooperate with Him. Ask yourself why you can be so embracing of temptation and so hesitant in faith, when it really should be the other way around. The deceitfulness of the sinful nature is subtle. The only effective counterattack is a firm “no” and an urgent appeal for divine assistance. It’s OK to ask for that, Jesus tells us. Don’t hide your temptations from the One who is glad to oppose them and to help you steer clear of them. If we’ve been a Christian long enough, we realize that while we’re holy in Christ, we’re still deeply flawed inside. Here in worship, we’re surrounded by addicts; dysfunctional families; physical and emotional cripples; and people with broken relationships, distorted perspectives and every kind of problem known to man. The crowds that came to Jesus represented in their physical infirmities the whole gamut of handicaps that infect our sinful nature. In church, physical handicaps are unmistakable, but the emotional, psychological and spiritual ones are usually hidden well. Eventually they show themselves. When they do, will we react like the Pharisees or like Jesus?

Jesus looked out upon the lame, the blind, the crippled and the mute and had compassion. He healed them and He fed them. What do we see when we look upon the crowds that are coming to Jesus? Do we expect to find cleaner, healthier people? We won’t. We’ll see similar crowds with similar problems—a world of infirmities laying all before His feet. Perhaps it disappointed us when we first realized how deeply flawed Christians can be. We are holy in Him, of course; all our sin has been washed away in His sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. But the sinful nature often rears its ugly head. How do we respond when we see the nature of the world within the walls of the church? How do we respond when we see it within our own hearts? Fellow followers of Jesus, we are the walking wounded; we’re those have risen from death and are still removing our grave clothes. We bring our flaws to Jesus, and He is compassionate. We must be too.

So what’s the inward solution, then? It’s Christ living in our hearts by faith, and our constant, conscious reliance on Him and cooperation with Him to change us from within, from the inside out. If this is your struggle—and you’re not alone if it is—resist the way of the flesh. Don’t be content with covering up the outward display of an unclean heart. Invite Jesus to do an inward work, conforming your heart into His pure image—not just once, but constantly. Believe that He will, and see what happens! Praise God that He “does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:10-12)! Amen.