

## Cleanse the Thoughts of Our Hearts - Mark 7:1-30

Series: Following Jesus: Studies in Mark's Gospel

Date: 20 February 2022; 7th Sunday after Epiphany

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Ezekiel 36:25-27; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 7:1-30

### Purity

If there's one thing we've learned over the last 2 years of the pandemic is how important it is to wash your hands. What did you learn to say in your head to make sure that you washed your hands for at least 20 seconds? Our text for today, Mark 7, turns on an argument over hand washing. The Jewish religious leaders notice that Jesus' disciples are eating without having washed their hands, and they ask him, "what's going on?" This isn't the battle I have with my kids trying to remind them every meal time to wash their hands first. That habit is part of Western culture's emphasis on hygiene as a way to prevent disease. In this text we're invited into a world where washing your hands is not so much about physical hygiene as spiritual hygiene. The Pharisees don't just say that the disciples' hands are dirty. It's much stronger. They are defiled. It's a word loaded with revulsion. For someone from a Western culture this seems very strange, but for many cultures in the world this makes perfect sense. I've not asked our Chinese sisters and brothers about purity customs in your culture, but I'd love to hear. If you've been at St George's for a while though, you may remember me talking with Tim about living in a Muslim country. This is what Tim said,

For the **Muslim**, being in a state of **uncleanness means that you are unable to pray to God** the 5 daily prayers, which every Muslim must do to as a follower of Allah.

**Defilement through – touching anything unclean** – dogs, pigs, blood, faeces, dead things, someone of the **opposite sex**, non-believers, **Eating non-halal food** ... The list goes on... All these render a person unclean.

This is similar to the laws God gave Israel in Leviticus. For the Jews of Jesus' day, keeping these purity laws meant that you could go to the temple to worship. For us in the West who live in the long shadows of the Gospel that frees us from keeping such laws, we can think, my goodness, what a burden keeping these laws must have been! But Tim said that actually,

**my friends are not burdened** by these things, on the **contrary they find comfort, security and even joy** because they are provided with rules of how they can purify themselves through ritual washing for any and every circumstance of physical uncleanliness.

The traditions of the elders mentioned in verse 3-4 may have functioned in a similar way for the Jews of Jesus' day. This perspective helps us in Western culture to appreciate how significant purity before God is. As the prophet Habbakuk says, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil."<sup>1</sup> The question that Jesus is trying to get the Jewish leaders, the crowd, his own disciples, and us too to consider is, **What does purity mean and how do we become pure?**

---

<sup>1</sup> Habakkuk 1:13

Even as I say that though, I'm conscious that we have a more complicated relationship with the idea of purity in Western culture. Over the last 2 generations, our culture has rejected "clean" and "unclean", "pure" and "defiled" as valid moral or spiritual categories. On a personal level we're told that to feel dirty or defiled is psychologically damaging and that for anyone or any religion to make you feel that way is harmful. Instead, you need to believe that you are worthy, valued, loved and so on, by sheer act of willpower. On a social level we condemn how categories of "pure" and "defiled" have been used to marginalise people, and led to racism, cultural and moral superiority. But we want to be an inclusive society.

Despite this cultural narrative, I want to suggest that just as this text is God's word to a Muslim culture, so it is also God's word to Western culture. We cannot so easily rid ourselves of the sense of being, at times, just a little soiled and our need to be cleansed. Maybe you've said or done things that have made you feel just that. How much worse if that impurity cuts us off from God? In our first story, Jesus shows us that our problem is worse than we thought, and in our second story, we get a glimpse of how he himself brings spiritual, psychological and social cleansing. So, after this rather long introduction, where are we headed this morning? We'll look at three points - Law, verses 6-13, Heart, verses 14-23 and Grace, verses 24-30.

#### **Law (6-13)**

The book that outlines in detail the laws around ritual purity is Leviticus. The great theme of that book is summed up in chapter 19 - "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy."<sup>2</sup> The purity laws in the book are designed to teach that the unclean cannot come into contact with the Holy or it will be destroyed and that the unclean must be cleansed. But through these laws God graciously has provided a way for his unclean people to be cleansed and so approach the God who is Holy.

Extra traditions had been added to the Levitical laws to make it clear for everyone how to keep them. The Pharisees were upset that Jesus' disciples weren't washing their hands because, in their minds, this raised the question, "Do they even care about God's holiness?" But Jesus gives this devastating diagnosis in verse 6:

"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.'

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."

The purity laws were meant to invite serious moral and spiritual reflection. Outward purity was meant to lead to inward purity. But Jesus says that the Pharisees are focussing on the outer and neglecting the inner. They look squeaky clean on the outside, but their hearts are far from God. What's more, their focus on externals and keeping the law actually leads them away from God and

---

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 19.2

true obedience. Jesus then gives an example of how they use a loophole in the legal tradition to get out of the fundamental obligation to honour your parents. We might say that they are following the letter but not the spirit of the law.

So if being pure is not about the externals, what is it about? Jesus takes this dispute with the Pharisees as an opportunity to teach the crowd, the disciples and us too. That brings us to point 2.

### **Heart (14-23)**

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. **15** Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

**17** After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. **18** “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? **19** For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

The Pharisees say that keeping the ritual purity laws is what makes you clean. Jesus says, “no, what’s on the outside can’t make you unclean.” Let’s pause the story there for a moment. What does Mark mean when he says, “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean”? Well there were in the Levitical laws animals that were clean and could be eaten, and animals that were unclean and therefore forbidden. This is Jewish kosher or Muslim halal. Here Jesus is saying, those laws no longer apply. You can eat whatever you want. But the food laws were a window into the whole system of ritual laws for cleansing and sacrifice.

One line that people sometimes like to throw at Christians is that we pick and choose which laws of the Bible to obey. After all we don’t say you can’t eat pork or prawns. But this text shows that the commands we still follow in the Bible are not arbitrary. When it comes to working out which of the Old Testament laws still apply to us as Christians and which don’t, there’s a really helpful rule of thumb from Thomas Aquinas. He suggests that the Old Testament laws can be divided into 3 categories - the ceremonial, the civil and the moral. As the one true sacrifice for sin, Jesus fulfils the ceremonial law. As God’s king Jesus fulfils the civil law. As such the ceremonial and civil laws don’t still apply to us, but the moral law does.

Talk of the moral law leads us back to Jesus’ diagnosis of what really makes us unclean, and therefore unable to approach God.

**20** He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. **21** For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, **22** adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. **23** All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

See, our problem as human beings is not ignorance. Education is not the cure. We don't need more laws. Our problem is not that if we didn't worry about the rules and simply got in touch with our true feelings and lived authentically then we'd be ok. It's not that we're essentially good people and that our upbringing and environment make us do bad things. No, the problem is that our hearts are a mess. It's our polluted hearts that mean we can't come near God. The taint is on the inside.

If you're honest with yourself you know this is true. I know it's true for me. I've said and done and thought things I'm ashamed of. There's things that go on in my heart that I don't want anyone to see. And I find by myself, I can't change my heart. Just believing that we're ok, loved, valued, worthy, quite frankly doesn't work. I just don't have that kind of willpower. And in any case it denies the reality of my experience. Pretending there is no problem robs us of the moral language we need to understand our own hearts. We can't make ourselves clean. We need to be made clean. That brings us to point 3.

### **Grace (24-30)**

The story Mark tells next points to how Jesus himself is the one who washes our hearts clean.

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. **25** In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. **26** The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

**27** "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." **28** "Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." **29** Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." **30** She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

In case you missed it, calling someone a dog is a racial insult. Some commentators argue that Jesus is trapped in his own Jewish culture's ethnic superiority, and that the Syro-Phoenician woman teaches him about not being racist and sexist. This seems to me to more reflect the cultural superiority of those who write such things, namely white intellectuals. In any case this reading fails to pay attention to the immediate context that we've just been looking at. Yes, those categories of clean and unclean had a social consequence. The Gentiles did all sorts of things that made you unclean. This meant that Jews wouldn't eat with Gentiles, and instead looked down on them.

First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

The children are the children of Israel. This Syro-Phoenician woman is the dog. We can imagine the disciples nodding along with Jesus. "Yes, that's exactly right. After all Jesus is the Jewish Messiah." But if Jesus had nothing for the Gentiles, why was he outside of Israel, in their territory? This is another moment where Jesus wants to teach the disciples. They haven't really grasped the

implications of what Jesus said, “It’s not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, but what goes into person.” So he goes along with their assumptions and invites this Greek woman to help them understand. And her response is brilliant.

Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

She turns the insult to her advantage. Doesn’t God have room for more than just the Jews? Doesn’t he have room for the nations, for someone like me? The answer of course is yes. Jesus frees her daughter from the unclean spirit. In Matthew’s account of this story Jesus commends the woman for her faith. She glimpses something that the disciples don’t yet see. That is, that all of Israel’s history, all her laws were pointing to and waiting to be fulfilled in Jesus. He was bringing in God’s kingdom, first for Israel, but also for the world.

Jesus, you see, has come to cleanse the defiled. In our reading from Hebrews we see just how Jesus accomplishes this cleansing. Through his blood shed on the cross.

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. **14** How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

He washes our hearts clean. His death removes the pollution that separates us from God. He takes our sin and shame and makes it his own, so that, in him, we can stand before God as holy, spotless, blameless. And he pours out his Holy Spirit upon us to change our hearts. This is what the prophet Ezekiel foresaw.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. **26** I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. **27** And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Jesus washes our hearts clean. The Holy Spirit changes our hearts and moves us to keep God’s laws.

This is why the social boundaries of clean and unclean no longer apply. Because Jesus has come to deal with the root of the problem, our hearts. This encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman looks forward to Peter’s encounter with the Roman centurion Cornelius. There God tells Peter in a vision, “Don’t call impure anything that I have made clean”. It’s at this point that Peter realises that Jesus hasn’t just come for the Jews, he’s come for all people. God’s arms are outstretched to welcome all. He says to Cornelius, “I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts people from every nation”.<sup>3</sup> In Jesus, and therefore in his church, there is no room for ethnic or cultural superiority. We all come, actually, like this woman.

---

<sup>3</sup> Acts 10.15, 28, 34-35

You may have been wondering when we would get to our 3 questions in Mark. Well here they are. What does this text teach us about Jesus? It points to so much that we see in the rest of Scripture. That Jesus comes to wash us clean. He comes to deal with our deepest problem - a polluted heart. He gives us his Holy Spirit to change us from the inside, and give us hearts that love God and our neighbour. Jesus has crossed the ultimate boundary - the Holy God, coming to a distant land, in the muck with us, to bring us home.

What about the Kingdom of God? It's not about externals but the heart. God's kingdom finds its fulfilment in Jesus, the king. He's the one the Old Testament was pointing to. He fulfils the ceremonial law. He purifies us to live the lives God calls us to in the moral law.

What about following Jesus? The Syro-Phoenician woman is for us a model of faith. In fact her words and her posture of faith have been taken up in what is called the prayer of humble access in Holy Communion. Like her of ourselves we are not worthy to come in God's presence. We have no claim on his forgiveness and cleansing. We can only appeal to God's own abundant grace and generosity. We need our hearts cleansed. We need forgiveness. We need the power of the Holy Spirit to change. And that is what he offers us. And he has given us this meal to remind us that he welcomes us as his children. Do you feel a burden of shame and a taint that you just can scrub away? Come to Jesus. Let him wash you clean. Come feed at his table. Come taste his grace.

### **Prayer of humble access**

We do not presume to come to your table merciful Lord,  
 trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies.  
 We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under your table;  
 but you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy.  
 Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord,  
 so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ and to drink his blood,  
 that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body  
 and our souls washed through his most precious blood,  
 that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us. Amen.