

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 15
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
True worship flows from the heart

The Pharisees and some of the experts in the law came from Jerusalem and gathered around Jesus. ² They saw some of his disciples eating bread with unclean (that is, unwashed) hands. ³ In fact, the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they scrub their hands with a fist, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴ When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions they adhere to, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, kettles, and dining couches. ⁵ The Pharisees and the experts in the law asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders? Instead they eat bread with unclean hands.”

⁶ He answered them, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it is written:

These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

⁷ They worship me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were doctrines.

⁸ “You abandon God’s commandment but hold to human tradition like the washing of pitchers and cups, and you do many other such things.”

¹⁴ He called the crowd to him again and said, “Everyone, listen to me and understand. ¹⁵ There is nothing outside of a man that can make him unclean by going into him. But the things that come out of a man are what make a man unclean.

²¹ In fact, from within, out of people’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, slander, arrogance, and foolishness. ²³ All these evil things proceed from within and make a person unclean.”

—Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

A loving father gives his son and daughter a list of rules and regulations. He assigns chores to them. He gives the curfew times. He makes his will clearly known to them. The son obediently follows his father’s rules, and so does the daughter. As you look at both of them, you would determine that they both are obedient children. But there is a big difference.

The son obeys his father so that he gets his allowance. He is also afraid that if he doesn’t obey, his father will punish him. The daughter on the other hand obeys her father for different reasons. She knows her dad loves her and has given those rules for her blessing and safety. And therefore, she wants to obey her dad because she loves and trusts him.

My friends, when it comes to following God, with which child do you most commonly relate? When God gives you his commands (“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself”) do you obey them as a way of getting something from God or out of fear for being punished if you disobey? Or do you willingly and joyfully follow God’s commands because you know your God; you love him and trust his ways for your life?

In our reading today we come face-to-face with a group of people called *the Pharisees*? The Pharisees were the religious elite who looked so obedient in their lives. They wanted to live pious and perfect lives. In fact, they looked down their noses at anybody who did not live up to their standards. But do you know how they got to be that way?

Can I take you on a brief history lesson? Bear with me for a little while, okay? I’m going to start with our first reading for today from Deuteronomy. Moses wrote Deuteronomy shortly before the people of Israel entered into the Promised Land. If you recall, God had established a two-sided covenant with his people. He basically said, “If you follow all the laws and commands that I am giving you in my Word, I will bless you abundantly. I will protect you. I will give you the land. No one will be able to take these blessings from you.”

Just skim your eyes over the first reading for today and you can see that. God wanted his people to pass on his laws and commands to future generations so that he would continue to bless them.

Well, guess what! They didn’t do that. They pushed God out of their lives. They disregarded his commands and his will for their lives. They broke the covenant that God made with them.

Oh, sometimes they followed through on God’s commands. Sometimes they would bring their sacrifices to the temple and follow through on the commands of God. But it was more like the son in our illustration than the daughter.

In fact, God sent the prophet Isaiah to give them a message. Approximately 2700 years ago, Isaiah said to God's people, "You're going through the outward motions when you are coming to the temple, but your hearts are far from God. You're not really obeying him. You're not really worshiping him."

And that was a problem. Sure, they looked good on the outside, but they didn't really love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind. They pushed God away from their lives.

And guess what eventually happened! They lost the land. They didn't keep the covenant with God, and they lost the land. The Babylonians came in and took the people captive.

Everybody with me so far? I know I'm covering a lot of history in a short amount of time. But it's here where we start to see how the Pharisees came on the scene. You see, God eventually brought his people back to the land of Palestine because he had a promise to keep. He promised that Jesus would come into the world as the Savior for the world. So, God brought his people back from captivity. And as the people are back in the land of Israel, they had time to reflect on how they lost the land in the first place.

They knew that their sins and rebellion landed them in a foreign land. They knew that they had pushed God out so that they lost all those blessings from God. And they were determined not to do that again.

So, over the years, some of the religious leaders started adding their own rules so that God would keep his promise of sending the Messiah. They made various rules and laws to ensure that they would keep God's rules and laws. In fact, they were convinced that the only way God would send the Messiah is if they cleaned up their lives and made the world ready for his arrival. They felt as though they needed to get rid of their sins so that the Messiah would come to this world.

That's essentially what the Pharisees felt they needed to do. These religious leaders felt as though they needed to live such perfect lives so that the Messiah would come and establish his rule in the land of Palestine. If the people would just clean up their lives, then the Messiah would come to secure the land for them.

Well, by the time that Jesus came into this world, the people had become experts at making all sorts of rules and regulations so that they could look good on the outside. The religious leaders added their own rules to the laws that God had given. They would say things like: Not only can you not touch a body when it dies, you also must wash your hands when you come out of the marketplace and any time when you eat because you might have gotten uncleanness on your hands, or sin on your hands, and when you eat that would go down your body and make you unclean.

When they said things like that, they weren't thinking about germs. It's not that they were concerned about hygiene and disease control in these words. That's not what they were talking about. They were all about the religious side. They made up rules. They wanted to show by their actions that they were followers of God. They wanted to make it known to God by their actions that they were ready for the Messiah to come into the world.

And I'll tell you what happened because of it. There was this wall of separation that was created between the religious elite and the common person. The Pharisees and the religious leaders looked so good on the outside. And they looked down upon the common person because they saw sin and filth. They believed the Messiah would not come until "the sinners" cleaned up their lives.

So, there was this huge wall of separation between the people and the religious leaders. And it's in this situation that Jesus comes. Here is the Savior of the world. Here is God himself in the flesh. Jesus came to this world not because people had already made their lives holy but so that he could make people holy. Jesus came to give us his perfection and righteousness so that we could be right with God.

That's what Paul talks about in our second reading for today. We have received a righteousness from Christ through faith. That's what Jesus came to give. Jesus came to save. And the way that he would do that is by perfectly obeying all of God's commands. He came to keep all the commands that God had given.

So, Jesus spent time with the people teaching them. But as he spent time teaching the people, he was not teaching them the manmade rules that the Pharisees had created. He was teaching the will of God. Jesus went out and taught the Word of God. He explained it. He proclaimed it to the people.

Well, as you might guess Jesus became very popular with the people. He was a healer and a teacher and a miracle worker. He spent time in the trenches with people. He cared about people. He loved people.

And the Pharisees and the religious leaders thought that Jesus was leading the people away from what God wanted. They even wondered if Jesus was a great big heretic. They thought that maybe he was a demonized man sent from the devil. So, they were always watching him and looking for a way that they might get rid of him.

Well, in our words for today, they send some Pharisees from Jerusalem to go north into Galilee to keep an eye on Jesus, to see what he was teaching, what he was doing, and to do something about it. And when they try to do

something about it in these words, that's when Jesus reveals to them and to us that **true worship flows from the heart.**

This is how Mark tells the story. **"The Pharisees and some of the experts in the law came from Jerusalem and gathered around Jesus. They saw some of his disciples eating bread with unclean (that is, unwashed) hands."** Remember not dirt, not germs. They just saw that they didn't wash with the ceremonial cleansing.

Now this next remark is giving information to Mark's first readers. Mark wrote his Gospel primarily to non-Jewish people, so he wanted them to know what was going on. **"In fact, the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they scrub their hands with a fist, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions they adhere to, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, kettles, and dining couches."** Now, at first, we might think, "What the big deal with how they wash their hands and utensils?" But the key is that they were trying to be ceremonially clean so that God would accept them.

Remember the rules that they added? They wanted to become so righteous by their own works so that the Messiah would come. They didn't see Jesus as the Messiah. They saw him as a *stumbling block* to the Messiah.

They saw that Jesus and his disciples didn't wash their hands the way they taught the people, so they asked Jesus, **"Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders? Instead they eat bread with unclean hands."** And Jesus saw right through them. They wanted to look good on the outside, but Jesus saw what was really going on. **"He answered them, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it is written: These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.'" Remember Isaiah? The Pharisees were trying *not* to be like their ancestors. They were trying to do all the right things. They were trying to be pious. But Jesus cuts through it all. These religious leaders are no different. "These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." Looks great on the outside, but something is wrong inside. "They worship me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were doctrines. You abandon God's commandment but hold to human tradition like the washing of pitchers and cups, and you do many other such things."**

What did these religious leaders not see? They didn't see their sin. They did not love God with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind. But instead of recognizing their failures in keeping God's commands, they tried to make themselves look good on the outside.

So, Jesus confronts these leaders who are concerned about the outward actions. Now watch what he does. He gathers the crowd. This is the population out there. This is the vast group of people that is starving for the Word of God. He calls the crowd to him, **"Everyone, listen to me and understand."** You can just see him raising his voice outside Capernaum. **"There is nothing outside of a man that can make him unclean by going into him. But the things that come out of a man are what make a man unclean."**

And then a little later he says, **"In fact, from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, slander, arrogance, and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and make a person unclean."**

What was it like to be Jesus Christ who read hearts? He could see inside. He saw the Pharisees talking to others about washing their hands when he could see that their hearts were unclean. Their hearts were sinful. That's what the people needed to recognize. My heart is what makes me unclean. My heart is what makes me sinful.

My friends, I am so glad that I can't read all your hearts. I couldn't bear it. But I'm also glad you can't read my heart. Because you would not be able to bear it either.

If God showed you what he saw in his holiness and righteousness and how sin is so deep in each one of us, it's a part of us, in everything we do and say and think, wow! It's offensive, downright offensive to God. It's that twistedness that is in each one of us.

That's what makes us unclean. That's what made Isaiah say when he saw God, "I'm finished. I'm ruined. I'm unclean in the presence of God." That's what made Moses take his sandals off in the presence of God. That's what made Peter fall on the bottom of the boat when he caught all those fish in the middle of the day. He said, "Go away from me, Lord. I'm not worthy." I'm unclean. And that's where it starts. You see, true obedience takes an honest assessment of what is inside. What is in your heart?

True obedience starts with a repentant heart. "I am sinful. And I am exposed before you, God, and I come to you because I believe that you forgive. Not because I believe I'm worthy and deserve to be here. It's because I believe you forgive." And who is the one exposing that truth in our hearts? Who reveals our uncleanness to us? The one who is perfect. The one who willingly died to take our uncleanness away.

And by the way, that's the reason why Christians come to church. We come to church to be near Jesus. We come to be near the one who died and rose again to cleanse us. We don't come to church to make ourselves look good. We

don't come to put on a pious show that we are more upstanding than others. We come to church to be near Jesus. We come to church with all our filth to be washed clean.

And that cleanliness comes from outside of you. It comes from Jesus who washes your sins away. That's the reason you keep coming back and you say another confession and hear another absolution, and it's brand new for you today because you know that you are still struggling with that uncleanness, and you know that God is *not* struggling to give you forgiveness and cleansing.

We can hold our head up. We can say, "Amazing Grace." I am saved. I have been washed. Jesus has washed our sins away.

So, what are you going to do with that? Well, I want to praise him. I want to live for him. I want to walk with the God who washed me clean. I want to follow him. And I want to love in the way that he loves me. Jesus has washed your heart clean. Now you can worship and obey him by following him. **True worship flows from a clean heart.** Amen.