

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

7 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and ² 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. ⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

⁵ 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?”

⁶ 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. ⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ ⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’” ²¹ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”

This is the Gospel of our Lord.

Dear Followers of Christ,

Do you wash your hands before you eat? I do most of the time, but not always. Why do I do it? Well, it’s something my parents taught me to do and I taught my children to do. It’s healthier but if you don’t wash your hands before you eat, you won’t die.

Yet the Pharisees made it seem like you might. They had mixed their traditions in with God’s Word and in doing so, had lost sight of God’s promises. Jesus tries to help them see how lost they are when it comes to, **“Spiritual Cleanness and Uncleanness.”** As we listen to our Savior’s conversation we will see that, **“Uncleanness does not come from unwashed hands or certain foods,”** but rather, **“Uncleanness comes from evil thoughts and actions.”** And Spiritual Cleanness, something we all want, **“Spiritual Cleanness can come only from Christ.”**

I. The Pharisees were influential spiritual leaders at the time of Christ. They had heard about how Jesus’ popularity among the people was growing and they were concerned. They didn’t want to lose any influence over the people. Jesus was conducting his ministry in the northern part of Israel and staying away from Jerusalem so the Pharisees sent a delegation to see if they could find anything to use to discredit Jesus.

The Pharisees thought they might have had something when they saw the disciples eating without first washing their hands. **“⁵ 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?”** They were taking Jesus to task because he did not rebuke his disciples for not following their traditions.

It helps to know that the Pharisees did not consider God's Laws handed down on Mount Sinai to be good enough. Could you imagine telling God, "What you gave us is a good start but we will have to add to it a little bit and fix it for you." So they added 613 "rules" to govern the peoples' lives down to the smallest of details. Over time, the gospel promise of a Messiah was ignored as the keeping of these rules gained more prominence as a way to heaven. Pretty soon keeping these rules became more important than listening to God's Word.

Jesus tried to show them their focus was all wrong by quoting one of Isaiah's prophecies, **"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. ⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."** The Pharisees were a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy but they didn't seem to care. They thought their actions, driven by tradition, were keeping them spiritually clean.

II. So Jesus had to be more direct with them. He pointed out, **"It is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean. ²¹ For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean."**

We would all like to forget original sin and think that we are all born as a good person but the psalmist reminds us, **"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."** (Psalm 51:5). We came into this world spiritually unclean – as an unbeliever and an enemy of God. Our unrighteousness came from within our own heart.

We may not identify with the list that Jesus gave but we have given into many of the sins mentioned in one way or another. Maybe not with our actions but at times with our thoughts and/or words. And we know that if we stumble in just one area, we are guilty of breaking all the commands of God. So what do we do? We want to be spiritually clean but our sins stain us with spiritual uncleanness.

III. Our lesson from last week from Ephesians points us in the right direction, **"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word."** (Ephesians 5:25-26). Paul reminds us that we have been washed with the waters of baptism and have been given a heart transplant with a heart of faith. Like when Jesus told Nicodemus (who was a Pharisee) that he must be born again – he needed to be born spiritually just as we all were when we were baptized and given a spiritually clean heart.

Through the sacrament of holy baptism we have been given the gift of faith so that my self-righteous heart has been replaced with the righteousness of my Savior Jesus. I still struggle with temptation and sin but with the help of my Savior, I can win those struggles and even when I lose, I can go to my Savior with a repentant heart and he will wash me clean with his holy, precious blood.

Cleanliness is important – not the cleanliness of my physical body but rather the cleanliness of my soul. Traditions are nice but they are not laws given by God. Traditions are nice but they can't save me. I can never do enough to cleanse my own soul and why should I because Jesus has already washed my sins away. May we enjoy our traditions but may we never let them replace God's Word because we need the spiritual cleansing that comes to us through the Word and we need God's help to always stay focused on Jesus, my Savior. Amen.