

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. ⁷They 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.” ⁹ And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ ¹¹ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), ¹² then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. ¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.” 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.’” 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 man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? ¹⁹ For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”) ²⁰ He went on: “What comes out of a man is what 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.’”

Have you ever seen a microscopic slide of what actually lives in your bedding? You can’t see these things. Your linens look white and shiny. There’s nothing like clean sheets, right? But if you look really, really close, there are small things that live in our beds and on our carpets and everywhere else you can imagine. Your house may look clean, but is it?

And how about your body? You may have the nervous habit of biting your fingernails. Do you know what’s under your fingernails? Maybe you don’t want to know! You might look clean on the outside, but are you really clean?

And that’s the point of the conversation that Jesus had with the Pharisees in our text. The Pharisees prided themselves on being clean on the outside, but Jesus showed them that it was what was on the inside that was most important. So how clean are you ... on the inside?

Are you clean, inside and out?

Let’s unpack this conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were really picky about washing their hands, especially when they came back from the marketplace. It

literally says they washed themselves “from the fist” or “with the fist.” They washed themselves the way surgeons would wash their hands before they go into surgery. They scrub them all the way up the arm and use a scrub brush under the fingernails. The Pharisees did this just in case they touched something that was ceremonially unclean. Or maybe they shook hands with someone who shook hands with someone who touched something unclean. These Pharisees criticized Jesus’s disciples, because they saw the disciples eat food without first washing their hands.

Jesus’ conversation with these Pharisees helps us to understand their hypocrisy and our own. He starts by quoting Isaiah. **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. 7They 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.”** Notice that they replace the worship from the heart with outward rules that they made up on their own. They thought that by making up more rules even beyond the Ten Commandments, they received extra credit and were super-righteous people.

This gives us some insights into Pharisaical thinking. To be a Pharisee and to think that you are a really good person, you have to make up your own rules and convince yourself that your rules are just as important as God’s commandments. For example, if you make a rule that says you have to do at least one good thing for your neighbor every single day, you can keep that rule. It’s countable and measurable and you can mark it off on the calendar every day. You can say to yourself, “I am a good person because I do something good for my neighbor every day.” Only, God never said that we should do just one good thing every day. We should do good things for our neighbor all day long.

Maybe you have your own rules in your mind. If I do a devotion every single day, then I must be a godly man. If I pray the Lord’s Prayer every night before I go to bed, then I must be a devout Christian. Do you think we deserve extra credit for things we should do anyway? Besides, God doesn’t say you should pray once a day. The Bible says you should pray without ceasing. The Bible doesn’t say you should have a devotion once every day. It says we should meditate on God’s Word day and night. If we think we are godly people because we made rules for ourselves that we keep, we’ve missed the whole point of God’s commandments.

Another thing that Pharisees do is that they love to judge others according to their own set of rules. Why did the Pharisees criticize the disciples for not washing their hands? Because it made them feel superior to Jesus’ disciples. It made them feel more devout and godlier. Do we do that? Yes, we do. There was a woman who attended our congregation a number of years ago. She had three children and she was not married. Suddenly she stopped coming and I asked her, “Why?” She said, “Because one time I overheard two ladies talking about me. They said, ‘She has three children, and she’s *never been married.*’ I felt so ashamed that I don’t think I can ever go back there.” Don’t say you’ve never done something like that, or that you haven’t felt like that. We are so quick to pass judgment on others! One of the greatest dangers to our faith is not moral failure but moral superiority. We think we are better than others.

Pharisees make up their own rules. They think they are better than others. And they will justify their wrong doing. Jesus gave the Pharisees an example of that. **8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” 9 And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! 10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ 11 But you say that if a man says to his**

father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God),¹² then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.” If a Pharisee really didn’t get along with his parents, and he didn’t want to support them in their old age, he would say that they were out of luck because he gave it to the church.

Do we think that way? Yes, we do. We love to justify our actions instead of repenting of them. We justify working too much and not spending time with our family by saying, “Someone has to pay the bills.” We excuse our angry outburst by thinking, “He just makes me so angry!” We excuse our rebellious attitude towards our parents by saying, “My parents are too strict; they never let me do anything!” The Pharisee inside of us is a master at manipulating the law to make ourselves look good in our own eyes.

Or maybe you are thinking, “I am not like those self-righteous Pharisees who were always looking down on everyone else.” If you are thinking that, then you just proved you are what you say you are not!

And that brings us to the whole point of this story and Jesus’ conversation with the Pharisees.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.’”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 man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’?¹⁹ For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”)²⁰ He went on: “What comes out of a man is what 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.’”** Do you hear what Jesus is saying? What really makes us unclean are the things in our heart.

Should we put our heart under a microscope for a minute? Jesus does that. There is no sin known to man that does not live in your sinful heart. Do you think you are not capable of murder? You’ve already committed that sin in your heart. There is someone you know that you just can’t stand. You wouldn’t say that you hate that person, but you really do. You are just too much of a Pharisee to admit that to yourself. If you can’t stand them, you certainly don’t love them, so you must hate them.

Are you capable of committing adultery? You already have. Jesus taught in the sermon on the mount that it is a sin to lust for someone else in your heart. Don’t try to tell me that those thoughts haven’t crossed your mind. The pornography business wouldn’t be a trillion-dollar business if our hearts and minds weren’t a cesspool for such imaginations.

Are you capable of stealing? Or greed? Of course, you are. Most of you were salivating when the lottery was over 700 million. You may have even controlled your desires to the point that you didn’t buy a ticket. But deep down inside, you wished you could. You may have even justified those desires by saying, “But I would give *most* of it away.” We are such good Pharisees, aren’t we?

Which leaves us looking for the answer to the question on our minds, “Then how can we ever be clean, if we are dirty from the inside out? Jesus doesn’t answer that question here, but he answered it for his disciples in a wonderful way on the night he was betrayed. The disciples

came into the upper room, arguing about which one of them was the greatest in the kingdom. (That shows you what was coming out of their hearts.) None of them volunteered to wash the dirty feet, so Jesus took a towel and got on his knees and washed their feet. **6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”** **7 Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”** **8 “No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.”** Jesus answered, **“Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”** **9 “Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”** **10 Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.”** He was referring to Judas, who already decided to betray Jesus, and who had lost his faith.

But everyone who believes in Jesus is clean. That answers the question that is on our hearts when we read this story and when we look into our filthy hearts. Jesus has washed us and we are clean! He has washed us with his blood and with the water of our baptism. He has washed us outside and inside and we are completely clean, inside and out. While we still struggle with that sinful heart of ours, we know that Jesus’ washing away of our sins happens to us every day.

I’ve shared this story from one of our missionaries to the Mormons out west. Like the Pharisees, Mormons are famous for making up their own rules, like not drinking coffee, and for demanding strict obedience to their rules. A young woman was deeply troubled and felt so guilty that she confided in a Christian friend. She had a reoccurring nightmare in which she was trying to scrub a spot from the white-tiled kitchen floor. No matter how much she scrubbed, it wouldn’t come out. She saw her husband and her fellow church members staring at her with disapproval. Her Christian friend brought her to a Bible study. One of the lessons talked about Jesus’ forgiveness. It was free and it was complete. Jesus’ blood washes away our sin completely. That night she had her dream, and as she tried to scrub the spot from the floor, Jesus appeared to her. He opened his hand and a single drop of his blood fell on the spot, and it was gone entirely. For the first time in her life, she felt clean, inside and out.

And that means, dear friends, that we can honestly deal with all our sins and especially the sins of our heart. We don’t have to cover up our sins any longer. We don’t have to wash our hands to make us clean, or find some other little ceremony that makes us feel good about ourselves. We don’t have to make excuses or find ways to justify our sins. We don’t have to look down on others and think we are morally better than others. We don’t have to be afraid to examine ourselves under a microscope to see how sinful we really are, because we know there is no sin that can stand the light of Jesus’ forgiveness. We can stand before our Savior without the pretense of hypocrisy and know that we are justified by his blood and sanctified by Spirit.

So are you clean, inside and out? As Peter said to Jesus, “You are already clean!” Amen.