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The Coronavirus has reminded us of our constant need to ensure that our hands are clean. For this is one way that this virus has spread. Through touch. Direct touch at times, through hand shaking or through physical contact between person to person. As well as through indirect touch. So, after we go on buses or ships or go through gates or touch handles, we also need to clean our hands because we don’t want this infectious disease to spread to us. And a simple way to prevent that is through washing our hands.

Now that works for hygiene but does it work also for spirituality? Can other people’s actions infect us? Can things that are bad make us bad? Well think of your toothbrush. It’s good to have clean teeth isn’t it? We need our teeth to be strong, healthy and clean and so hopefully we brush our teeth regularly to achieve that. But does that affect our speech? Does having a clean mouth stop us from swearing? Does it mean only true, encouraging and helpful words come out of our mouths? Of course not.

Just as your Mum washing your mouth out with soap was never going to clean up your speech, so neither will a good scrubbing with a toothbrush. That can only affect our appearance, our outsides, which by the way is a good thing, a great thing for our health. But it will never do anything with the source of our words, our insides, our heart.

That’s what Jesus wants to talk about today. Not clean teeth, nor clean hands, nor clean actions but a clean heart. How can we really be clean on the inside? How can we live lives of purity and holiness? And is there anything we can do today to somehow scotch guard our lives so that the dirt of the world doesn’t get in? Well when we pick up the action with Jesus there is a dispute between him and the Pharisees over clean hands.

1. **Clean Hands (verses 1-13)**

 “*The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus****2****& saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.****3 (****The Pharisees & 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 defiled hands?”*

The Pharisees are accusing Jesus and his disciples of behaving like Gentiles. They haven't

washed their hands. They’re ignorant of basic Jewish customs, dealing with ceremonial cleanliness in the sight of God. But this is was not about hygiene and the stop of infectious diseases. It is about godliness and not allowing uncleanliness to enter into our spiritual lives.

You see God wants his people to be different, holy, distinct from others. So how do we achieve that level of holiness? Well we will follow God’s law to the letter & we avoid people who don’t want to follow God’s law. We will not join with them when they eat or drink in case what they do rubs off on us. And in a way that makes sense, perfect sense.

But the Pharisees went one step further. They took God’s law and built a fence around it. Actually, in the Mishnah, a second century compilation of Jewish oral laws it says *“Tradition is a fence around the law.”* So, they purposely built up traditions that meant that you weren’t even tempted to go even close to breaking the law.

Remember Jesus has previously been in trouble with the Pharisees because the disciples had picked heads of grain on the Sabbath. That was the fence they had just gone over. You see you couldn’t work on the Sabbath for that breaks God’s fourth commandment. So, the teachers of the law said will let’s make sure we don’t even go close to working. So, they made a law that one can’t even pick grain on the Sabbath, so the disciples who have picked grain have jumped the fence and are now working in Sabbath breaking territory!

Now before we get too hard on the Pharisees that is not a bad desire that they have is it? To remain pure, to be clean and holy and to not break God’s commandments. To not let the dirt, the moral filth around us come inside of our lives. To not even give it a chance. That makes sense to me. And so sometimes we do something similar. We build fences around God’s ways to make sure we don’t even go close to breaking his commandments.

Let me give you two examples that were part of my discipleship when I first became a Christian. The first one has to do with alcohol. The Bible says clearly, we should not get drunk. So, what is the easiest way of making sure I don’t get drunk? I abstain from alcohol completely. That will build a fence that means that I won’t even get close to getting drunk.

A second example? Pre-marital sex. That is a temptation for many when they start dating. So, to protect people from breaking God’s law, we build a fence saying there are certain parts of another person’s body that you can’t touch because that could lead to an increased desire. But where do you draw the line, where do you build the fence? Touching below the waste, below the neck, holding hands, kissing, dancing, lipstick? So, we build fences.

But the issue then becomes if I construct the fence at a different point than you, will you judge me because I jumped your fence in order to get there? We can be so like the Pharisees in that our laws become more important than God’s laws. Which is Jesus point.

*“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “‘These people*

*honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.* ***7****They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’* ***8****You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”* The danger is that our fences becomes more important than God’s laws. That our traditions become the touchstone of faith.

And so, Jesus gives the Pharisees an example of where they got it all so wrong.***9****“You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honour your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.****11****But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—****12****then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother.* ***13****Thus you nullify the word of God.”*

Do you get it? The Pharisees began by wanting to keep and uphold God’s law and his ways. But by adding a fence, by adding their own laws and putting them on an equal standing with God’s laws and or even over time above God’s law, they placed their emphasis on outward actions, on clean hands so to speak. When clean hands aren’t as important as a clean heart.

Rules, laws, traditions, look like they are signs of spiritual cleanliness. They look like and feel like they should lead to a greater holiness. But instead they can rob God’s word of its power. They can lead to legalism, to hypocrisy because they don’t deal with the root cause of our sin. For it’s not about clean hands its more about a

1. **Clean heart (verses 14-23)**

 ***14 “****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.”*Food is not what defiles us. It won’t affect your spiritual health because it doesn’t go into the heart or the mind. For the biggest corruptive elements are not outside of us but inside of us. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.

Preacher Daniel Akin puts it this way, *“Sin always proceeds from within. Food ends up in the stomach but sin begins in the heart. Food is eaten, digested in the stomach & expelled. Sin however remains in the heart & then produces all manner of defilement & death. The basic problem of fallen humanity is not what we do but who we are. Real filth, defilement &*

*impurity are inside”* for v21-23 *go on to say* ***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 & folly* ***23****All these evils come from inside & defile us.”*

Evil acts come from an unclean source. But it is not unclean food or unclean people. Food doesn’t make us commit adultery. People don’t force us to be greedy or arrogant. These things come from inside of us. So rather than fencing the uncleanliness of the evil around you by adding more laws, it is more important to attack the problem at its source. The heart. Which is why Jesus brought an end to such ceremonial laws. They highlighted the problem but didn’t deliver a solution.

So, getting back to the two issues I raised prior that of drink and pre marriage sex. I can abstain from drink and so never get drunk and then judge others unfairly for going into a pub and having a beer or two. I can make sure I am never drunk but if my heart is not right, I might be filled with pride for being better than my brother.

Or alternatively I can build a fence to help keep myself pure in my relationships but without Jesus changing my heart and dealing with my desires I will still jump that fence and every other fence ever constructed because the power of desire within me is stronger than the power of wanting to serve Jesus. Thus, rules makes us proud and will lead us away from the God who is the source of all godliness.

Friends, clean hands are not enough. You and I need a clean heart. Dealing with our external

temptations will never give us power over our internal desires. So the question then comes to us, how do you & I become clean on the inside? Well Mark now will lead us to a story that will help us find a solution to that question. Funnily enough it’s all about an unclean woman.

1. **Unclean? (verses 24-30)**

***24 “****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…a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet.****26****The woman was a Greek…”*

Now if you had an unclean gigametre this woman would be off the scale. She’s from Tyre, modern day Lebanon, a country that is one of Israel’s longest standing enemies. She’s a Greek, a gentile so she doesn’t have any historical connection with God or his ways. She’s a woman which means at that time, she has very little social standing or influence and her daughter has an unclean spirit. Really there is uncleanliness wherever this woman looks.

And what’s worse is that Jesus doesn’t make it particularly easy for this woman. “*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.”*

Did I hear right? Did Jesus really call the Gentiles, dogs? Let’s walk it through step by step. This woman is saying to Jesus I want, no I need your help, your mercy, your bread of life. And Jesus is saying in reply, first, first let the children, the family of God, the Jews eat what they want. And that is what Jesus had been doing up until now. He had been feeding the Jews the bread of life first of all. That was why he had come. Yes, later he would send his disciples to the Gentiles with the good news but the children must come first, before the household pets, the dogs have their day.

This was a test of faith for the woman. Do you know your place in salvation history? Do you understand that God wants to work through the Jewish nation first before he gets to the Gentiles? But this woman is just about to pass this test of faith with flying colours. For Jesus is currently in the vicinity of Tyre and amongst a Gentile population. And this woman realises that God does care for all people Jew and Gentile and so she responses with faith, great faith. ***28****“Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”*

Yes, feed the children, let them have what they want, what they need, the woman replies

back. But make sure we Gentiles get something as well, and we are more than happy with

the crumbs from the table of God. For a crumb of God is still enough to get rid of the demon in my daughter. A crumb of grace is more than what I need & that is why I have come to you

Derek Thomas says “*Now this woman didn't have a Bible. She knew nothing of the New Testament. She knew nothing of the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone apart from the works of the law. But she knew this much: that the answer to her problem, the answer to her predicament lay in one person and in one person alone. Jesus… And no matter what the obstacles, no matter what the difficulties, she persevered. She would not take no for an answer. She believes… And Jesus says of her, ‘Your faith is great*”.

Here is the first Gentile believer in the book of Mark. Someone who outwardly is unclean but whose faith is reaching out to God. And her uncleanliness is not going to rub off on Jesus but Jesus cleanliness is going to rub off on her and her unclean daughter. That’s where holiness is going to come from. That’s where a heart might be cleansed. When it comes to Jesus in humble, trusting, heartfelt faith. But Mark doesn’t want to stop there. He wants to weave one last strand into his story and show us how Jesus

1. **Cleansed** a death and dumb man (verses 31-37)

***31****Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre & went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee & into*

*the region of the Decapolis”.* So, he still in Gentile territory.***32 “****There some people brought to him a man who was deaf & could hardly talk & they begged Jesus to place his hand on him”.*

It looks like Jesus is about to jump another fence. Another Gentile. This time one who is tied up with massive physical disabilities! ***33 “****After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears”.* He takes this man aside, this is not a circus, this is a human being with a need of the touch of Jesus. Which is what he does for him. This man can’t hear or understand so Jesus uses a sort of sign language.

So, He communicates to him in the only language this man can understand. He puts his fingers in his ears, as though He were saying to him, “I am going to do something with your hearing. I'm going to do something with your tongue, with your speech.” Jesus is entering this man's world. Jesus is coming right down to where this man is. And healing him. Making him better. Whole again. God does something. He touches this man and transforms him. And the results don’t take time like with a doctor or some medicine. They’re instantaneous.

No one who is unclean is beyond the cleansing of Jesus. No one is too far away to receive the touch of Jesus. The law wasn’t going to change this man and his life. The rules of men would never have the power to bring about such a transformation. Even when this man shows no outward signs of faith, Jesus can still do his work of changing him and his heart.

Rules have their place but they will never change our heart. We can clean our outsides but it will never change our insides. Only Jesus can do that. Only Jesus can turn a heart of stone into a heart of flesh. Only Jesus can give us the heart transplant that we all truly need. And that new heart is available whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, a man or a woman, showing signs of faith or no signs of faith. We are saved by grace. God’s grace. And the response to that grace is not obedience, it is not keeping the law, it is faith. Humble faith. Being willing to receive the crumbs of grace from the table because a crumb of grace from God is enough.

Friend, cleanliness, holiness doesn’t come from following the law. From fencing ourselves away from evil. It comes through faith in Jesus Christ. That’s what you need as you think about alcohol, sex, pride, greed, jealousy. You need Jesus help, Jesus strength. Just Jesus.

Mark 7

***7****The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus****2****and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, 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 defiled hands?”* ***6****He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “‘These people honour me with their lips,  but their hearts are far from me.* ***7****They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’*

***8****You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”* ***9****And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!****10****For Moses said, ‘Honour your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’[*[*e*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24474e)*]****11****But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—****12****then you no longer let them do anything for their 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 person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”****[16]****[*[*f*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24480f)*]* ***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.)* ***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.”*

***24****Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.[*[*g*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24488g)*] 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.*

***31****Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre & went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee & into the region of the Decapolis.****32****There some people brought to him a man who was deaf & could hardly talk & they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.* ***33****After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit & touched the man’s tongue.****34****He looked up to heaven & with a deep sigh said to him “Ephphatha!” which means “Be opened!”.****35****At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened & he began to speak plainly.* ***36****Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it.****37****People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”*