

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 honor 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.”

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.”

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.” (Mark 7:1-8, 14, 15, 21-23 NIV2011)

Create in Me a New Heart

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions. It’s the acknowledgment that you can have the best intentions in the world, but it can still lead to bad things happening. You know this. You wanted to help. You wanted to encourage them. You wanted to try and fix it. So you said or did something, but ended up just making things worse. The entire situation blew up in your face. That saying is also the acknowledgment that you can have the best intentions in the world, but if you never follow through with it, it doesn’t change a thing. You know this too. But then when we don’t follow through with those good intentions, we can find ourselves trying to use them to defend ourselves: “I meant to be better! That should count for something right.” But the truth about good intentions kills us.

The Pharisees and the scribes had good intentions. They wanted to make sure to keep God’s Word. They knew that if they wanted to be in God’s presence, they need to be clean and pure. This isn’t talking about just practicing good hygiene. God had chosen the people of Israel, the Jews, as his holy nation. Just as the Lord is holy and set apart, so his people must be holy and set apart from the nations around them. So the Lord gave them commands of what they could and could not do for every aspect of their lives. It was to ingrain into their minds that if you want to remain God’s people you must be clean. If you

want to be in God's presence, you must be clean. Those who were unclean were outside of the community. They didn't belong. They were not allowed into God's presence. That meant not being allowed to be part of the worship at the temple or bringing sacrifices. So over time their elders set up these different traditions to help the people. I'm sure it started with good intentions: keep the person clean so he might be able to be in God's presence. These traditions then were passed down to protect those intentions. But they missed the point.

That's what we see happening with the Pharisees and teachers of the Law in Mark 7. They are all sorts of upset because they see Jesus' disciples eating bread with defiled, unwashed hands. The Pharisees and scribes aren't concerned about proper hygiene. No, these disciples are failing to keep one of the long-standing traditions that all the Pharisees and Jews knew and did—ceremonial vigorous washing of the hands. You did this to keep yourself ceremonially clean. And the disciples weren't doing it. So when the traditions meant to protect the good intentions aren't being met, the Pharisees confront Jesus: "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders?"

Jesus turns it around on them: "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 merely human rules" (v.6-7). You hypocrites; you put on this mask doing the right thing, but it's a cover. You're just acting, going through the motions. You think you are honoring and worshipping God doing the supposed right things, but your hearts are so far from him. You thought you were protecting God's commands by following these traditions, instead you abandoned God's Law. Their good intentions along with their traditions had blinded them from the truth and they allowed it to happen because the truth kills.

We have so many good intentions. We see the world around, and all that's going on and you know something isn't right. Once happily married couples with the intention to stay together till death end in divorce. Confirmation students intend to stay faithful to Word and Sacrament end up on the delinquent list. Parents intend to raise their children in God's Word trying to balance intentions of giving good life experiences end up losing in one way or another. We have the intention of being loving, caring, not judgmental, but then end up ignoring sin, hope that it just goes away, not confront the individual and, therefore, are condoning the action. We have the intention to be better people, to control the temper, to resist the addiction, to be more caring, to be hard working. We want to do the right thing. But the good we want to do is not what we do but it's the bad we keep on doing. What a wretched man I am (Romans 7).

We see all of this and we want to do something about it. It's not right. We need to fix it. The human solution is to set up more rules, more policies, and hold tightly to different traditions to try and curb it. But the policies and rules only get you so far. Guilt-tripping

someone never works. It either leads to open defiance or burdens someone's conscience. Sure, it might fix the action, but Jesus makes it quite clear: God isn't interested in us just doing the right thing if the heart remains far from him. So you start thinking about your life, how much is just going through the motions? How much of what you do is just doing the supposed right thing that's what mom and dad, grandma and grandpa, a spouse or friend expects you to do?

We see the problems in the world and we do call out the very visible sins—the couple living together before marriage, the abortions, the sinful lifestyle choices, homosexuality, laziness, crimes against society and people. The intention is that we want to make this world a better place. We want to fix it! But while we shake our heads in disbelief wondering why or how could they do such a thing, do we remember to call out the other ones too? What about the greedy heart that is not content with what God has given? It's not just the wealthy who are greedy. What about the hateful words? Jesus said anyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer. What about sex before marriage? What about pornography? What about the time we waste? What about the little white lies? What about the bending of truth to fit your own agenda? What about how you speak about your government? About that neighbor who has hurt you? What about that envy that is less-than happy that someone else has something you want or the jealousy that fears of losing what you have? What about that lack of self-control not just with different substances but a lack of discipline in your life allowing other things, other people to control you? What about that arrogance? You know you are not better than anyone else, but at least you are not judging other people. At least you work hard. At least you do your best. At least I'm trying to do what is right. Don't you see how arrogant that is comparing yourself to someone else to lift yourself up from your own failed intentions? If we fail to call out these sins too and see them as damning as they are (and almost worse due to the fact that we often downplay the seriousness), we are just as bad as the Pharisees who worship God with their lips but their hearts are far from him.

But why do we do it? Because the truth kills. The sinful actions are only a symptom of a far worse disease. **“Out of a person's heart evil thoughts come,”** Jesus says, **“All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”** The problem is me. It's you. Like those Pharisees we listen to that lie that if I do the right thing and can achieve these intentions, I can stay in God's presence. I'll be in his good graces. I can make myself clean. We want to believe that we can do or avoid enough things so that God will love me. But Jesus doesn't mince words. There is no good news here in this section. He hammers us with the Law to show us that relying on good intentions paves the road to hell. He speaks this truth to kill any idea that I can do something to be clean, pure, set apart and with God.

So Jesus has to be serious with the Law. He has to let that harshness stand because he loves you. And because Jesus loves you he leaves God's presence in heaven to live in our

presence. Jesus didn't just intend to save you, where the Law demands, "Do this," and, "Keep that." Jesus says, "I did." Instead of trying to ignore the problem, he lifted the burden of the Law from your shoulders. Instead of trying to avoid the harsh truth, he claimed your sin and failed intentions as his own, and God hammers his own Son with that killing law.

Jesus' heart was set on following God's will, and he did. He did not come into the world to judge it, but to save you. He did not come to put people beneath him, he came to lift them up with selfless service. Not one impure thought came to his mind. His heart was set on saving you, and it is finished. He who was in God's good graces was forsaken by the Father to give you peace. He gave up his life dying on the cross to pay the price for all your failed intentions. The blood that pours off His cross washes away all your sin. He cleanses you with the washing with the water and the word in baptism. He brings you into God's presence as His own radiant bride without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:20). That Old Man of sin was killed with Jesus on the cross, and we were raised with Jesus from the dead in the waters of baptism a new creation with a pure heart. The Law can only do so much. It's the Gospel and Good News of Jesus that changes hearts to hear his words and do them.

As long as we live on this earth, we daily sin much. Daily we wrestle with that Old Man of sin who wants to think that we can save ourselves. So the life of a Christian is one of daily repentance. Daily we drown that Old Man in baptism. Moved by Jesus' love and the forgiveness of sins sealed to us in baptism, confess your sin. Be honest with yourself. I am the chief of sinners. At the same time, know you are set apart. You are God's holy one. He does not treat you as your sins deserve. Your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake. And as forgiven sinners, we come as beggars to his house where we sit in God's presence and he comes to us in Word and Sacrament. He invites you to be with him at the Lord's Supper. Here your flesh and blood Savior gives you his body and blood to forgive you and refresh that new heart. We leave here with the Lord's face shining on us in the peace that he isn't keeping score. You already have the victory through Jesus Christ. You are already right with God. You already have all his love. God does not need your good works or good intentions, your neighbor does. So go, do your best with what you have; Jesus is with you. Know Jesus' love and share it with love and serving at home, as citizens in society, as members of church. As you go to bed at night and you remember how you could of, should of, wanted to do better or different, pray, "Create in me a new heart and renew a steadfast spirit within me." And in the confidence of Jesus' love, go to sleep in peace, Jesus did it all for you. Amen.