

St. Paul Lutheran Church
Grant Park, Illinois
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 2, 2018
Mark 7:1-8, 14, 15, 21-23

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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.) 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?”

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

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 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.’” For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”

Do you know Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax collector? It is about two men who go to church to pray. The Pharisee is someone you'd expect to be there. He lived a very good outward life. Honest, hardworking and appeared to be very godly. The tax collector is not someone you'd have expected to be there. He was a cheat. He hung out with lowlifes. He was a social outcast, but Jesus shares a story about both of these men going to the temple to pray.

What was their prayer about? **"Two men went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income.' However the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but was beating his chest and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"**

The two men went to the temple to pray. Which prayer do you think God was pleased with? The first or the second? **"I tell you, (tax collector) went home justified rather than the other, because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."** Did you catch that? God was pleased with the dirty, rotten, no good liar and wasn't pleased with the man who was honest, hardworking and godly. How is this possible? Our gospel lesson reveals the answer.

"The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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.)"

"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?'" Did you catch the reason why the Pharisees were mad at Jesus' disciples? They were mad because the disciples weren't following the rules they had set to properly worship God. For them, the only way to properly worship God was by following the tradition of their elders.

Now, you might think to yourselves, "Didn't these men realize what they were saying? They were saying the only proper way to worship God wasn't the way God said, but the way they said." Do you think God might have a problem with the fact human beings are making their opinions equal to or maybe even greater than God's word? I know you're thinking God has a problem with it (and he does!), but we also need to understand something about these men.

These men knew their Bibles backwards and forwards. They knew God's word better than you or me, but what happened? These men who knew their Bibles so well ended up setting their own thoughts and opinions on equal ground with God's word. What can you and I learn from their example? We need to be on guard against making our traditions on the same level as God's word. How might we do this?

How would you react to these scenarios? Our leadership decides people have become too accustomed to using the same worship service over and over again and they decide to start using the contemporary version of the Lord's Prayer once a month to keep things fresh. How would you react? Would you

understand their point or would you get angry because you love the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer?

Or have you ever run into someone who is convinced the King James Version of the Bible is the only correct version of the Bible and they look down on people who don't use the King James? Or do you think because you've gone to church here long enough that you should be able to get your way because you've been coming here longer than someone else has? Or do you immediately shoot down any idea which is brought up to make others feel welcome in our church because it makes you uncomfortable?

Have you caught the danger yet? Human nature likes to take personal preferences (things such as the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer, the King James Bible, the fact I've been a member here longer than you have or refusing to listen to an idea about making others feel welcome because it might make me uncomfortable) and make them equal with God's word. It is just human nature to do it. How does Jesus respond to these actions?

“(Jesus) 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. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.’” Ouch. Jesus' words hurt. He calls people who make human traditions/personal preferences equal with God's words hypocrites. Fake Christians.

Does it seem a bit excessive to call people who faithfully come to church fake Christians because they have a strong preference for something? My pride screams out, “Absolutely! It isn't fair. How dare you suggest it, pastor, that because I prefer a tradition that I'm a fake Christian.” I need you to understand something if these thoughts are creeping up in your hearts. It isn't me who is calling you a fake Christian. It is your Lord because you have made your tradition equal with his word.

I want us to think back to my introduction. What was the Pharisee's prayer about himself? **“God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income.”** Couldn't a person's desire to cling to tradition because it is a tradition soon pray, “Lord, you are so lucky to have someone like me who has kept your church pure because I have held to the traditions which have made this church so great.”?

Do you see where Jesus might have a problem? Jesus' problem with the Pharisees wasn't the traditions they held to. Jesus' problem was that they made themselves equal to and greater than God. Jesus' problem isn't with the traditions which we love. His problem is with us when we try to make ourselves equal with God. **“Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.’”**

“‘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.’ For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’” Jesus clearly lays out that we can never be equal with God because our hearts are factories which produce nothing but sin.

Do you know who truly understood this fact? The tax collector in our introduction. The tax collector knew he was a sinner through and through. He didn't deny the fact and went to the temple with one goal in mind: he went to beg the Lord for mercy. What did he receive? **"I tell you, (the tax collector) went home justified rather than the other, because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."**

The Lord showered mercy on the tax collector. He forgave the guilt of his sins and the tax collector went home forgiven. Yes, our hearts are filled with all kinds of evil. Sometimes we're better at hiding what is going on in them and sometimes the evil comes out, but Jesus' love for us is greater than our sins. His mercy is stronger than their weight. It is the reason he invites us to come to his house. He wants us to bring the weight and guilt of our sins to him and confess it to him.

Each one of us has thoughts, words and actions which we all regret. Each one of us has thoughts, words and actions which torment us. Each one of us is guilty of making personal preference more important than God's word, but the amazing thing about our Lord is he forgives us every time. Jesus' blood covers each and every single sin we have ever committed and will ever commit. Yes, your wicked thoughts, words and actions are forgiven.

Yes, your sins of making your personal preferences equal with God's word are forgiven. Yes, your sins of thinking you are better than someone else are forgiven. Yes, even the disdain you feel in your heart when Jesus calls you a fake Christian is forgiven. Jesus' death has wiped away each and every single one of your sins. It is what makes his love amazing. It is what makes his love indescribable. It is what makes his mercy exactly what you and I need.

Now, what should we do with the mercy God has shown to us? A good place to start is to evaluate whether or not you have allowed your personal preferences to become more important to you than your savior. Jesus wants us to worship him, but did he ever say you could only worship him by saying a certain version of the Lord's Prayer or using a certain version of the Bible? Or your opinion is more important at this church because you've been here longer than someone else?

Did Jesus say every idea about worship and where I worship and when I worship which makes me uncomfortable needs to be shot down as fast as possible? Simple answer: no. They all are personal preferences and we need to be careful to make sure personal preferences don't become more important than Jesus and his message. I'm not saying all personal preferences are wrong, but a God-pleasing life guards against making personal preferences more important than Jesus.

Two men went up to the temple to pray. One of them worshipped a God he preferred while the other worshipped a God he needed. The one who worshipped the God he preferred remained his sin while the one who worshipped the God he needed went home forgiven. A God-pleasing life isn't filled a life which worships the God we prefer. A God-pleasing life is a life which worships the Jesus we need and uses our Christian freedom to serve him by loving others more than our personal preferences. Amen.