

CLEAN IN CHRIST

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 | Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost | Aug 30/Sep 2, 2018

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."

Jesus

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I think most of you are aware that my wife and I recently became "empty nesters." Marcus is in his first year at Martin Luther College. He's studying to be a pastor. George and Josie are both at Luther Prep School in Watertown. It's the dorm life for them, an empty nest for us.

So far my wife and I would use one word to describe this experience: *weird*. It's just weird not having the kids around. We miss each of our kids' unique personalities. It's kind of hard to get used to the quiet, the change of schedule and pace, and the fridge and cupboards not being so empty all the time. Again, weird.

One aspect that we are really enjoying: the house is clean. And it's staying clean. No clothes on the floor. No dirty dishes or random piles of clutter on every horizontal surface. We no longer need a Sherpa to climb to the top of the laundry pile. Sometimes – and you'll think I'm exaggerating here – we go an *entire day* without running the dishwasher. Crazy! We like this part of the empty nest experience. It's good to be clean.

There's another sense in which it is good to be clean. I'm not talking about a preference for a tidy home. I'm talking

about an absolute necessity, a matter of life and death. A holy God requires each of us to be spotlessly clean, free from any stain, sinless. And that just isn't something we can't accomplish. There is only one solution to the stain of sin: the blood of the Lamb. God's Word assures us today that we are CLEAN IN CHRIST. Our text shows us that by nature we are unclean, and unable to erase the stain of sin. Nevertheless, through the blood of Jesus, we are clean.

I. By Nature We Are Unclean

The Pharisees were obsessed with cleanliness. It wasn't so much about hygiene. It was about ritual purity. They were terrified of becoming ceremonially unclean. The ceremonial law given through Moses has a lot to say about this. By these laws God was teaching them about their sin and unworthiness before him. He was teaching that only he could make them clean. And he would do that through the promised Savior.

God's law wasn't enough for the Pharisees. They added their own rules, 613 of them, that regulated life down to the smallest detail. One of those laws had to do with washing your hands before eating. They placed no importance on the

real reasons for ceremonial cleanliness. They weren't interested in confessing their sin and looking to God for cleansing. For them it was all about the outward show.

Jesus pointed this out to them on a number of occasions. He wasn't exactly gentle with them: **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁷ Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean”** (Mathew 23:25, 27).

In 1 Samuel we find these familiar words: **“People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart”** (1 Samuel 16:7). God isn't fooled by an outward show of piety. He hates it when people honor him with their lips while their hearts are far, far away. He isn't interested in robotic, outward obedience. It's what's inside that counts. He wants our hearts.

Well, what about those hearts? Pure as the driven snow, right? Hardly. Listen to Jesus: **“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.”

“Just follow your heart.” That's the advice we often hear. It's bad advice. Our hearts are poor guides. By nature our hearts are ruined by sin, totally depraved. We see the symptoms in our own lives. Jesus listed them for us in graphic detail. He wasn't talking about someone else. He was talking about you and me. Our hearts produce atrocious attitudes, terrible talk and disgusting deeds. This filthy sin-infection in our hearts can lead to only one result: spiritual and eternal death. We have a problem much more serious than big piles of laundry or a cluttered house. The stain of our sin earns us an eternity in hell.

II. We Can't Erase the Stain

What can we do about it? Pilate washed his hands and said, **“I am innocent of this man's blood”** (Matthew 27:24). It didn't work. His guilt remained. The Pharisees relied on “human traditions.” They added their own laws to God's. Those laws, which were even stricter than God's laws, were like a fence around them. If they didn't break through the fence of their own laws, they wouldn't break God's. With this system they thought they could earn God's favor. So the logic went.

We are often guilty of the same diabolical logic. It just makes sense to our sin-addled reason that we have to do something to earn God's favor. If we want to go to heaven, we have to be good little boys and girls. We have to keep our noses clean and follow the rules. The proverb tells us the result of such thinking: **There is a way**

that appears to be right but in the end it leads to death (14:12).

Why don't works work? Because God demands sinless perfection. And we human beings, born in sin and living in sin, can't give it to him. That's why Paul wrote to the Romans: **No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law (3:20)**. My friends, you can't cut down a forest with a pocket knife. You can't dig the Panama Canal with a spoon. You can't empty the ocean with a Dixie cup. We can't earn God's favor with our obedience. It just won't work.

III. The Blood of Jesus Makes Us Clean

So how can we ever hope to be clean in God's sight? How can we ever hope to go to heaven about which the Bible clearly says **"nothing impure will ever enter it"** (Revelation 21:27)? How can we ever truly be clean?

We can never make ourselves clean enough. But Jesus can. And Jesus did. He lived a pure and clean life in our place, **"a lamb without blemish or defect"** (1 Peter 1:19). Scripture tells us that **"without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness"** (Hebrews 9:22). And so the perfect Lamb of God climbed up onto that cross and shed his pure and perfect blood to take away the sin of the world. He poured out that blood to wash away your sin and my sin. He poured out his lifeblood for us on the cross and then took his life back on the third day. Because he did all this, we and all who believe in him are pure in his sight, free from every stain, clean as a whistle.

In his First Epistle John wrote these beautiful words, words that I think about almost every day: **The blood of Jesus, [God's] Son, purifies us from all sin (1:7)**. Notice how complete the cleansing is. All sin. The blood of God's Son leaves no stain behind.

One of my college professors once spoke this prayer: "Jesus, bleed on me. Bleed all over me and my works." I know that sounds kind of strange. Who would want someone's blood all over them? Many of us are trained on how to avoid blood-borne pathogens. But really it's a beautiful prayer, a prayer that gets to the heart of the matter. True cleanliness comes from only one source – the blood of the Lamb, the blood of Jesus.

Every night, when my head hits the pillow, if I'm honest, I have to confess how completely I have failed to live as God wants me to live and the deep depravity of my own heart. It's time to pray, "Jesus, bleed on me." When I think my daily failures: As a father – Jesus, bleed on me. As a husband – Jesus, bleed on me. As a pastor – Jesus, bleed on me. Insert your own vocations in life. Every one of us needs to pray, "Jesus, bleed on me. Cleanse me with your precious blood. Forgive me." Do you know how the Savior responds to that prayer? **"Take heart ... your sins are forgiven"** (Matthew 9:2).

What do we do with this forgiveness? How do we behave now that God has made us clean? Well, we certainly don't go out and wallow in the filth like pigs. Think of it this way: When you pull a clean

dress shirt out of the dryer, you don't immediately take that shirt outside, throw it on the ground, and stomp it in the mud. In the same way, we don't want to take hearts cleansed by the blood of Jesus and grind them into the filth of sin.

Now that Jesus has cleansed our hearts it is our joy to serve him with those pure hearts. We serve him with pure thoughts instead of lust, with honesty instead of theft, with love instead of hatred, with contentment instead of greed, with goodness instead of malice, with thankfulness instead of envy, with kindness instead of slander, with humility instead of arrogance. In short, with the Spirit's help, we suppress the natural inclinations of our hearts, and strive to live a life that is pleasing to God. And we do it all not to earn salvation, but to thank Jesus for the salvation already won by his blood.

And when we fail – and we will every day – we go back to the fountain of his blood found in Word and Baptism and Supper for cleansing and strength. One day, when we enter glory, words spoken in Revelation will be spoken about us: **“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”** (7:14). And we will live with that Lamb and serve him “in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness,” pure and perfect, clean and content, forever and ever.

The kids are gone. The house is clean. And that part of the empty nest is kind of nice.

Much more importantly: Sin is gone. We are washed in the blood of the Lamb. That's more than kind of nice. That's everything. We are clean in Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen.

S.D.G.