

# SPECIAL MESSAGES

## CLEAN HEARTS

### Mark 7:1-23

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

“This people honors me with their lips,  
but their heart is far from me;  
in vain do they worship me,  
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” And when he had entered the house

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and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

In 1807 William Jay was a young pastor in London. In the fall of that year he made his way to visit his mentor, John Newton, the great author of “Amazing Grace,” the hymn. He was a gifted pastor. Like Newton, Jay was a gifted pastor, and like Newton, he was without formal theological training. Jay had a sense that this would be a final visit. Newton was well into his eighties. Within a matter of weeks after this visit, he would die, he would pass on. Newton’s memory and eyesight were failing, so Jay brought along a pencil and pad. After a brief meeting, he went down the stairs from his visit with Newton and out into the busy streets of London. He pulled out his pencil and pad and scribbled out these final words. They are the last recorded words of John Newton. “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior.”

The impact of those words was a bit lost in the moment on Jay, but later he would return to those words and grasp the profound nature of these two glorious truths. Glorious truths? Really? I am a great sinner? Christ is a great Savior? I understand that the idea that “I’m a sinner” doesn’t have strong cultural currency in our day. The idea that there is something within me that needs to be made right is unpopular. It might help you to know that this is not really a new idea. This is not just a 21<sup>st</sup> century idea. 2000 years ago Jesus walked the face of the earth, talking with very religious devout people. He encountered those with a very superficial understanding of the problem of sin and a very naïve perspective on human nature.

John Newton was not just giving a clever phrase in those last recorded words. He was actually remembering when all else was failing, two truths to live by, two truths that bring liberty. I say this because the first truth, though a difficult one, “I am a great sinner,” opens the door for the second: “Christ is a great Savior.” This passage actually provides for us some great insight into understanding how these truths work. So, I want to give you four summations, four ideas we take away from the teaching of Jesus here.

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### 1. Sin is described.

He tells us in verse 21: “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.” What is sin? Jesus doesn’t give us just a definition. He tells us what sin looks like. He actually lists 13 nouns, a Baker’s dozen, if you will. The first one is an umbrella term: evil thoughts. In some ways it’s the title, summarizing everything else. Then he gives two lists of six. The first list is plural and the second list is singular. He moves through the first list, which appear to be acts in the plural that we do. Then the second list -- attitudes that lead us to act.

Some of that is lost for us in the English translation, but that’s the way it reads originally – a list of six plural and six singular. It probably had the rhetorical effect of this larger focus, plural acts narrowing down to these specific attitudes that are in the heart of man. Jesus begins by giving us this description. There is no mystery to the things that he lists here, maybe the things that traditionally we would call sin for hundreds and hundreds of years. So we begin with this description of sin. Then we go to secondly:

### II. Sin comes from within.

If we want to really understand this teaching, this is a profound idea, a profound truth, that sin is found within our own hearts. Think for a moment about the tradition that Jesus addresses. In the first few verses Jesus addresses the Pharisees and the scribes. The scribes would be experts in God’s scripture, experts in the Old Testament. We are told that these leaders had certain practices of cleansing, washing their hands before they would eat. Some of you are thinking right now, “My mom was a Pharisee. She was a scribe. She made me wash my hands.” But this was for spiritual reasons.

Lest we think that this was just a crazy idea, there was value in this kind of instruction. There are reasons we do certain things described to us in scripture. We fast so that we can cultivate a hunger for God. We kneel in prayer to remind ourselves that we want to humble our hearts before God. We lift our hands in worship because we want God to be exalted in our lives.

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Sometimes these outward activities and expressions help us to worship God with the whole person. They are intended to be cues for us, to help us open our hearts and worship God from the heart. This practice reminded individuals that they needed to be cleansed. They were critical of Jesus because he didn't follow their list of rules.

The reality here is in the Old Testament there is instruction given, but in addition to the Old Testament, a whole list of traditions had been developed – oral traditions that had been passed down, that were added to the word of God, that were intended to bring clarity and to help individuals practice what was given there in the instruction.

Jesus challenges those traditions. He actually brings a rather strong rebuke. We read, “And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ He is saying, “You are hypocritical. Your worship is empty. It's lip service, not heart service. And instead of following the word of God you have substituted traditions of man. This is a really strong rebuke, right? You do not want me to come in here on Sunday morning and say, “You hypocrites!” Right? No response, please.

So, Jesus teaches us here, “Sin comes from within.” This is not the only place we are taught this truth. We are taught in various places in scripture that the actions of our lives, the fruit of our lives come from the tree, come from the heart. This is very helpful, because we are prone to blame circumstances. “I acted that way because he did this. She did this. I was tired. I was hungry. I've been mistreated.”

While there might be some truth to the way environment provokes us, impacts us, the deeper truth in scripture is that sin comes from within. This is glorious if you can get this, because you'll never get free if you are blaming someone else or something else. And mankind will never be free as long as we are looking for superficial solutions. What Jesus is giving to us is very profound.

The third big idea is that:

III. Sin defiles.

It brings massive corruption. We've seen this in many ways in our own experience, though we've not always been able to identify the source with the result. To teach this, Jesus does something

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that's really amazing. He talks about this idea of Corban. It's a crazy practice that developed where a person would say, "I know I'm supposed to honor my father and mother. They are getting old, and when they get old, you're supposed to take care of them. That's what God wants us to do, right?" So they had this practice where they would say, "Well, Dad, I would give this to you, but it belongs to God. I've given it to God. When I die it will go to the temple. But because I've given it to God, I can't use it to help you."

It was the original deferred giving. There are various ways that you can defer giving. You can put Riverside Church in your will and when you die, your stuff can come to the church. It's a good idea. You can take your money and put it in a foundation. If you are here and you have millions of dollars, maybe you'll do this. You are saying, "I know I need to give, so I'm going to put it in a foundation and figure out what I'm going to do with it later." I've got a great foundation for you: Riverside Church. Just give \$2.5 million to this church and \$175,000 a year will go into ministry as interest that you will earn dividends for all of eternity. Did you follow that? Yeah, that's what it costs us. Our debt service is \$2.5 million, and that's a great foundation. It's a great way to not defer your giving.

So I would suggest to you that there are challenges with the whole idea when there is so much need confronting us in this very moment, though it may serve you and it may be the best thing for you to do. Some of you are like, "Oh, wow, I think he just told me not to put my money in a foundation." No, I didn't say that exactly. They were actually doing something that was clearly evil. They were still using it, just giving it to God so they wouldn't have to give it to someone else in this lifetime – and Jesus called them on it. He said, "You are using worship to disobey God. You are using your traditions to disobey the commandment of God." His theme here is: Sin corrupts. It defiles the person. You are not unimpacted by your sin.

This is what happens to us. We say, "I'm just going to dabble. I'm just going to try this. I'm just going to look at this. I'm curious. I'm just going to enjoy this a little bit." We don't realize that that act, that attitude, that embrace corrupts us. We are bringing into our very souls defilement that then corrodes our humanity. Jesus said it like this in Mark 9. Teaching about sin, he says,

And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell.

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He is using a form of hyperbole. He is not literally telling you to cut off your hand or foot, but he is saying something very strong. He continues...

And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'

Strong teachings. Listen to what Tim Keller says about this reference. This is really helpful to grab ahold of what we just read in Mark 9.

Sinful behavior (the reference to the hand and the foot) [sinful actions], and sinful desires (the reference to the eye) are like a fire that has broken out in your living room. Let's say a cushion on your couch has ignited. You cannot just sit there and say, "Well, the whole house isn't burning --it's just a cushion." If you don't do something immediately and decisively about the cushion, the whole house will be engulfed. Fire is never satisfied. [Sin is never satisfied.] It can't be allowed to smolder; it can't be confined to a corner. It will overtake you eventually. Sin is the same way: It never stays in its place. It always leads to separation from God, [this is really good] which results in intense suffering, first in this life and then in the next.

So, there is a helpful warning here, to say, "Alright, I need decisive, strong, clear action.

Part of the application here is that Jesus is telling us when we run from temptation there are practical steps that we will need to take that are not easy steps. But I think when you put the teaching together, we understand that there is a bigger problem here, because sin is not just in the hand or the foot or the eye, right? Jesus is teaching us it's in the heart. So what will I do and what will the solution be? That leads us to our fourth and final point:

IV. Sin doesn't have to be terminal.

There is a place where Jesus in this passage is doing away with the oral tradition. He is saying these traditions do not reveal God in the way you think they do. You are putting your hope legalistically in these rules and you are not getting closer to God. You are not experiencing cleansing. But he goes further than just challenging the tradition. Do you see it? Do you see what he did? He declares all foods clean! Standing there before his apostles, it's so dramatic that they don't even get it at the

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time. Mark, looking back, influenced by the Apostle Peter, puts in parentheses: (Thus he declared all foods clean.) But if you read it, here is what Jesus says. He starts with this solemn formula: “Listen, understand what I’m about to say to you is really important. What goes into you isn’t what defiles you; it’s what comes out of your heart.”

Now, that is actually addressing part of the Old Testament that was ceremonial. Jesus is saying, and the fuller teaching of the New Testament is saying, “Listen, what you have in the Old Testament is sacred, it’s pure, it’s beautiful. It has brought me to you. And all of the ceremony that you see there, I am the fulfillment of. Not the oral tradition, that’s not what’s going to bring clarity to you about who God is. It’s me.”

This is why Christians don’t worship, for example, on Saturday, the seventh day, but we worship on Sunday, the day of the Resurrection. We are saying there is a part of God’s law, the moral law, that holds authority in our lives, but we don’t celebrate all of the ceremony of the Old Testament. We eat foods that would be forbidden, because Jesus has fulfilled that ceremonial law. If you grasp what Jesus is doing, you have to ask this question: Who are you? Who are you to just show up and say, “I’m the fulfillment of that and all foods are clean”?

Jesus would say, “Well, I’m the one that raised Lazarus from the dead. I’m the one that raised that little girl from the dead. I’m the one who spoke to the waves and told them to be still. I’m the one who fed 5000. I’m the one who fed 4000. I’m the one who opens blind eyes. I’m the one who restores hearing to those who can’t hear.”

He is the Son of God. He is the perfect revelation of who God is, and he comes on the scene to say, “Listen, I’m the one who cleanses you. I can do something better than just offer you a reformation plan. I can give you a new heart. I can give you a new life. I can completely cleanse you. The fixes that you are offering are not addressing the root problem. They are not really bringing change.”

I want to just offer this to you. This is my journal from last year, through October. On October 22, I read Mark 7 in my own devotional time. I was on a plane from Houston Hobby Airport to Tampa, then to Fort Lauderdale. My wife and I were on this plane. This is what I wrote as I meditated on this passage. I said, “Sin is described. It comes from within. It defiles.” Then I spend a little time talking about what it means that sin comes from inside my heart. I said this: “In our hearts, you are teaching us that we do these things (listen) because we love them. These are actually our desires.

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This is the first step if we're going to get free of them, realizing that we love them, that they are in us. They are in our hearts, the places where our loves and affections live."

"Father, this sin defiles me. We are naïve to think that we do sin while not becoming sin. We are defiled. We are corrupted and rendered unclean. Lord Jesus, it is not possible that you would teach this lesson, then not set us free from what you describe. I approach you and seek your fresh work in my own heart and life."

And here's what I want to share with you. Listen to this. "You became sin. All the sin described here, you became: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. Every sin described here you became, though you never committed a single one of them. You carried each one to the cross, along with all of its power and all of its darkness. You hung there naked and exposed, beaten and finally executed to conquer and overcome sin. You give me a new heart. You give a new heart to all who believe, all who receive you – to each one you give the right to become children of God. How could I ever overcome that which I love and desire and want? How could I ever want to? But you expose its end. You set me free. You glorify yourself by giving me a new heart. You are bringing new life moment by moment."

At this point on the plane, I feel like I'm starting to have Revival. "You replaced my heart of stone with a heart of flesh. You became sin and went to the cross, but you didn't stay there. You were placed in a grave and you didn't stay there. You rose on the third day. You are the resurrection. You are the life. You cleanse me. The defiled one made unclean because of the filth of my sin is now made clean by your blood and sacrifice. I confess. I am forgiven. I am washed."

Now, I finished saying, "Lord, how I need this message today. I feel so unworthy to approach you, to come near the Father. I have failed to be patient, to reject defensiveness." Those were sins that I was particularly aware of that day. "My heart and my eyes and my mouth and my mind and my spirit have sinned. I confess and have asked you today to be thoroughly cleansed. I believe that I am alive and that you have made me new. My desires and loves are daily changing to look more like you. I am no longer powerless."

If that sounds like some kind of self-help, I just want to say that I entered into this moment on the airplane feeling condemned, discouraged, powerless, helpless, and I left this moment celebrating how Jesus has washed me. I finished with this sentence: "You invite me to confidently and boldly

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draw near because you have taken away my sin.” The idea here is: “I am a great sinner, Christ is a great Savior.”

The embracing of those truths allows me to experience daily, daily, daily, the cleansing of the good news of who Jesus Christ is. It invites me into a place of renewal in all of my relationships. It invites me into a place of renewal in my marriage, with my sons, with my friends, with the staff, with the elders, and with those who are in my life who don't yet know Jesus. It invites me to say, “Listen, why am I surprised that these things happen?” I have a thorough explanation for why the world is a mess. Am I shocked that there are people in our land right now that want to say a woman can be in the middle of giving birth and say to the doctor: “I want to abort this child?” Doesn't that just bring utter dismay? Yeah, you know what? There's a fire in the house and if you don't put it out it will eventually consume the entire house. Sin doesn't stand still. This is what scripture teaches me. This is my explanation for why the world is the way it is.

Here's the great news: Many of you here have had an abortion. You've been a part of that. Jesus cleanses you. Come to him. He offers you free cleansing.

You know what? If you want to remove the first truth, if you want to say, “Oh, it's not so bad; it doesn't matter,” I can't help you. You will look for cleansing in superficial ways and live your entire life with the guilt of that sin. But there is freedom in Christ! There is freedom for you in Jesus.

In this moment of persuasion can I say to you, if you are considering that or if you are on the verge of it, or if it's a temptation for you, don't go there. Don't do it. Come to Jesus and he will cleanse you of that temptation before it even happens.

So, I have an explanation for why the world is the way it is, for the reason I'm the way I am. Final thought, maybe. Here's the challenge for me. When you offend me, and when you sin against me, I'm armed right here with an understanding: “Okay, we have a condition where we need help from Jesus. We are sinners. We all need a Savior. In human relationship, that offers us hope. It offers you an opportunity to not live with offense that becomes bitterness and rotten, that decays and corrupts your life. The problem is, I'll look at your sin and say, “You know what? I would never do that. I would never do what you just did to me.” And you know what? I might be right. I might be 100% right, not because I'm better than you. My flavor of sin is different.

So if you get so mad at me that you won't speak to me for five weeks, like you just block me out of your life, that's going to really offend me. And I would say, “You know what, I'd never do that.

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Because if I'm mad at you, I'll kick the door down. I'm not going to ignore you. Try to ignore me? My sin just takes on a whole different flavor, right? That should be a lightbulb moment. You say, "Wow, you are a wicked pastor!"

I'm following John Newton's example. I'm a great sinner. Christ is a great Savior. There are many varieties, 13 categories of sin that Jesus lists here. Some I'm more prone to and they express themselves in my life in different ways. It's going to be different in you, but I'm not shocked. You need a Savior just like I need a Savior. So let's be a community where together we pursue the salvation that is ours in Christ, bringing restoration to a community here in South Florida. Amen?