CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS?
Mark 7:14-23

I invite you to open your Bible to Mark 7:14-23. As we continue our series, Is That Really in the Bible, we ask that question today of the well-known statement: “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” Who hasn’t heard that?

• Perhaps you heard it from your mama when you didn’t wash behind your ears or left your room so cluttered it took a HazMat team to clean it up.

• Maybe you heard it from a Sunday School teacher as she lined up your class to wash your hands before the snack.

• Maybe you heard Ms. Kay say it on Duck Dynasty. And who could blame her with a family full of rednecks who spend a lot time up to their knees in mud or cleaning fish or skinning frogs. And only God knows what’s tangled up in the long, bushy beards her menfolk wear! Pontificating that cleanliness is next to godliness may be her only defense.

• And if you’ve been a Methodist along the way, I suspect you’ve heard it maybe in church. It was John Wesley, a founder of Methodism, who preached it in a 1769 sermon called On Dress in which Wesley proclaimed, “Cleanliness is indeed next to godliness.”

So we’ve heard the saying from multiple sources, but is it in the Bible?

Some of God’s laws in the Old Testament make clear that while God is not OCD about cleanliness, He cares about it. Deuteronomy 23:12-13 spells out some latrine laws: do your business outside of camp and cover it up when you’re finished. There are also instructions in Leviticus about how to clean up the house from mildew or after a leper has been there. And don’t forget the food laws: God spelling out which animals are “clean” and which are “unclean” (Lev. 11). Leviticus reads like a sanitation manual. God cares about cleanliness.

And in the Talmud, rabbinic teachings based on the Law and assembled in the second century, Rabbi Phineas ben Jair lists a series of virtues including carefulness, vigorousness, cleanliness, and godliness. Since his list puts
cleanliness next to godliness, some conjecture this is where the saying first started getting traction.\footnote{\url{http://www.buzzfeed.com/jessicamisener/11-things-everyone-thinks-are-in-the-bible-but-arent}}

But the ideal that cleanliness is next to godliness had a lot of traction before then. Phineas ben Jair was no doubt influenced by the teachings of the Pharisees, a Jewish religious group that emerged during the time between the Testaments when various pagan kingdoms ruled over the Jews. In an effort to develop and sustain a pure Judaism among the people, the Pharisees expanded the Law of Moses down to the smallest details. The Pharisees did go OCD on cleanliness laws, prescribing particular ways to clean everything from your cups to your pots to your dining couches to your hands. Hands had to be held just so. Water had to be applied just so. Over time, the Pharisees began to believe their additions to and explanations of the Old Testament laws were as inspired as the originals. Their laws became law. By Jesus’ day it had gotten to the point that in the minds of the Pharisees, cleanliness isn’t just next to godliness, cleanliness is godliness.

And presto-change-o, suddenly a person’s spiritual life was judged by externals rather than internals. That’s what Jesus was getting at when he scolded the scribes and Pharisees, saying, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness” (Mt. 23:27). And it’s in that context of what really makes for purity and cleanliness that Jesus speaks the words in our text. Hear the word of the Lord … (read the text).

I

It’s important to note that our text is a response to what happened at the beginning of chapter 7 when the Pharisees took Jesus’ disciples to task because they were eating with “hands that were defiled.” In other words, they didn’t wash them at all or they didn’t wash them just so according to Pharisee rules. And did they ever push Jesus’ buttons when they did that!

Jesus called them hypocrites and laid a little Isaiah on them: “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.” Next, Jesus exposed their sinful hearts in the way they use their rules to weasel out of honoring their parents. And then, as the coup de grace Jesus used their food laws to expose their focus on externals instead of paying attention to the heart.

Jesus wanted to be sure everybody heard what He had to say about this, so he circled up the crowd who’d been watching this confrontation. Once they gathered round, Jesus cleared his throat and said, “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” (7:14-15). Jesus left that with the crowd as food for thought and went into a house with His disciples.

III

Well, the disciples weren’t digesting that food for thought very well. And it’s hard to blame them because what Jesus said sounded like He was making a verbal U-turn from everything the disciples had learned as kids at their local synagogue Sabbath School. So they asked Jesus to explain a little more. Jesus sighs and shakes His head: “So you don’t get it either? Don’t you see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?”

Jesus is giving His disciples a basic biology lesson here: “Now pay attention students. Today we are going to learn about the digestive track. You put food into your mouth. You chew it. You swallow it. It tracks down your esophagus and enters your stomach. Digestive enzymes go to work on it, breaking it down. From your stomach, your food then tracks through your small intestine; your body absorbs essential nutrients, stores some of the fat, and passes the waste—what it can’t store—into your colon, which works the waste down the pike and eventually out of your body.” Basic biology 101—test on Friday.

It’s interesting that Mark adds a parenthetical remark here in v. 19: “Thus he declared all foods clean.” Even though the Jews had some serious dietary laws, Mark claims that Jesus is bringing those not so much to an end as to fulfillment. They’ve done their part, Jesus is saying. They’ve demonstrated that it’s not what comes from the outside that defiles us. They
point us to a solution beyond external things.\textsuperscript{2} “Go ahead and eat pork and catfish if you want. Food doesn’t defile you because it comes into you from outside. It’s a stomach thing, not a heart thing.”

Jesus then goes on to describe what does defile a person, what does make a person unclean:

\textit{What comes out of 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.}

Yikes! What a list! But Jesus puts his finger on what really makes a person unclean: personal sin—sin that originates in the individual’s heart. And in this list that has obvious connections to the Ten Commandments, Jesus makes clear that sin is not confined to one’s actions (murder, adultery, sexual immorality) but also includes one’s attitudes (coveting, envy, pride).

If we didn’t have the gospel, this would be a very disconcerting text. Jesus essentially says, “You’re all a bunch of sinners. Your hearts are deceitful and wicked. And there are no external actions you can take to clean yourself up.” But it doesn’t keep us from trying, does it?

We try religion which says we can clean ourselves up by keeping certain rules: like, for example, the old “don’t drink, don’t cuss, don’t smoke, don’t chew, and don’t you go with girls who do.” But why do people who do this either never feel clean or have to look down on others who don’t keep their rules to try and feel better about themselves?

We try politics which says we can clean things up by changing structures and practicing social justice. There’s a lot to be said about structures that oppress and about social justice that helps people, but don’t we often see changes that don’t last or corruption among the politicians that try to fix things.

\textsuperscript{2}For a fuller discussion of this, see Timothy Keller, \textit{King’s Cross} (New York: Dutton, 2011, 80-81.)
And we listen to prevailing culture which says that we can clean ourselves up by going to therapy. Rather than dealing in personal responsibility, culture is into blame and victimhood: “If my dad had not been absent, if my mother had told me she loved me, if my dad had not been an alcoholic, if I’d have gone to a better school, lived in a better neighborhood,” and on and on and on. And culture’s answer is get therapy, go to a clinic, or just live with the fact that you’ll be a slave to your past and live a diminished life because of what others have done to you. There’s nothing wrong with getting some therapy, but if it misses the sin dimension it may leave a person no better off at the end than she was at the first.

III

There’s only one answer to our uncleanness, our sin nature, and that’s the blood of Christ He shed on the cross for our sins. That attacks our problem from the inside out. And that’s really where the Old Testament was trying to point us all the time: the Law to show us our sin, the sacrifice system to show our need for a substitutionary death in our place, and the prophets to remind us that we can scrub the surface all we want but that won’t make the heart clean before God. Nobody said that better than Jeremiah: “Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Lord God” (Jer. 2:22).

When I was on staff at First Baptist, Fayetteville, during the last of my college days I did a children’s sermon in worship. I brought a bar of soap and asked the kids, “What do we use a bar of soap for?” Several hands shot up and answers were shouted out, and the gist of the response was this: “To get ourselves clean.”

“Ok,” I said, “soap can clean us on the outside, but what can clean us on the inside?” Another hand shot up. I put the microphone in her face and she said, “Eat more fruit.” Children! So concrete and literal. But at least she understood one thing: soap can’t clean us on the inside.

Grownups understand that too. In Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Lady Macbeth instructs her husband to murder Duncan. Later, consumed with guilt she tries to wash her hands of the crime but she can’t get rid of the stain. And thus her famous lines: “Out, out, damned spot: out I say! ... Will these
hands never be clean? ... Here’s the smell of blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!”

Lady Macbeth is right. You can’t wash away your sin. You can’t cover it up. Lifebuoy won’t do it. Lava won’t do it. You can’t Shout it out. Not even Bon Ami will scrub it clean. And no amount of Axe Body Spray or Old Spice or Chanel No. 5 will cover up its stench. We need something more, something outside of us, something not of our own making. Thank God that something is available to us all. The Bible says, “The blood of Jesus, God’s son, cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). That’s the remedy. That’s the cure. That’s the only thing that can make us clean before God. We need the blood of Jesus covering our sins.

And this doesn’t happen in a shower, a Laundromat, or the dry cleaners. This is a spiritual transaction in which you trust that the work Christ did on the cross He did for you. You acknowledge your sin and your need of Him, and you receive His gift of cleansing and forgiveness and life.

IV

So is the phrase “Cleanliness is next to godliness” really in the Bible? I’m afraid not. There’s nothing wrong with taking plenty of baths and showers and splashing on a little smell-good when you’re done. In fact, it’s a good idea and I highly recommend it. But that won’t bring you one step closer to God. The dirt that keeps us from God is too deep—heart deep, sin deep—and only the blood of Jesus can clean us in a way that brings us next to God. Trust God today for that cleansing.

And give God thanks at His Table. As we take in our hands the bread and the cup, we remember that our sin is so great and God’s love is so deep that He gave Jesus’ broken body and shed blood to cover our sins. So we come to the Table to say thanks. Thanks be to God for our forgiveness. Thanks be to God for our cleansing. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

INVITATION TO THE TABLE

3http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/full.html
Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and pow’r.

*I will arise and go to Jesus,*  
*He will embrace me in His arms;*  
*In the arms of my dear Savior,*  
*Oh, there are ten thousand charms.*

Come, ye weary, heavy-laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall;
If you tarry till you’re better,
You will never come at all.

Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him.

*I will arise and go to Jesus,*  
*He will embrace me in His arms;*  
*In the arms of my dear Savior,*  
*Oh, there are ten thousand charms.*

Come and look at the cross of Jesus;  
See the Savior on the tree.
See Him suffering, see Him bleeding,
Dying there for you and me.

Come and gather ‘round His Table,  
Bread—His body, cup—His blood.
Come and worship, come and thank Him  
Taste and know that you are loved.

*Will you arise and go to Jesus,*  
*He will embrace you in His arms;*  
*In the arms of our dear Savior,*  
*Oh, there are ten thousand charms.*
PRAYER

As we come to your Table this morning, Lord Jesus, we acknowledge that we are sinners and you are our Savior. We thank you for your love, for your grace, and for the way in which your blood cleanses us from all our sins. Bless the bread and the cup, rich signs of your body broken and your blood shed for us. Amen.

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