

DEFILED

Mark 7:14-23

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 7, verses 14 through 23. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches how we really are. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 7, beginning at verse 14, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's talk about defilement. You and I are defiled. That's probably not what anyone wants to hear. It's not a feel-good message, but it's the truth. We are defiled. And this morning we will consider how this is.

So I have a theological question for you. It's a foundational, fundamental question. It has to do with your sin and your heart. Here it is; I want you to think about this: Are you a sinner because you sin, or do you sin because you are a sinner? Do you know what I mean? It's kind of a “chicken or the egg” type question. What comes first: your actual sins, or your condition as a sinner? Or another way to put it: do your bad actions corrupt your nature, or is your nature already corrupt, causing you to commit actual sins? Are you a sinner because you sin, or do you sin because you are a sinner?

And this is not a trick question. It's not one of the questions I sometimes set up for you, where both answers are correct. There is only one correct answer here. It's the second one. We sin because we are sinners. Our nature is corrupt before we even do anything. It is not the things outside of us that defile us, but those things that come from within. It is those things that flow from our hearts that defile us. Your real problem, my real problem, is not all the stuff out there. It's not the violence in Afghanistan. It's the violence in our hearts. It's not the immorality on your screen. It's the immorality within. It's not the envy, deceit, or slander of the people around us. But it is the envy, deceit, and slander of our own hearts.

This is the way the Bible describes our sinful condition. And, especially in this text, Jesus really lets us have it. The problem is within.

This text follows and is very much connected with our gospel lesson from last week, the first part of Mark 7. Last week Micah Berge explained for us the proper use of tradition, and especially the improper or sinful use of tradition. The improper or sinful use, Micah explained, is when we place tradition above the Word of God. That is exactly what the Pharisees and scribes were doing in that gospel lesson, and Jesus called them hypocrites for doing so. They were concerned about handwashing, especially after returning from the market. It's possible that, while at the market, they could come into contact with a Gentile or some kind of non-kosher meat. So they washed their hands in order to get the Gentile off of themselves. We wash our hands for health reasons, but that wasn't really their concern. They were concerned that Gentile or non-kosher contact would defile them spiritually. So the otherwise healthy practice of washing one's hands became a tradition that they treated as a commandment of God. And there were several other traditions that also gained the status of divine doctrine. Therefore, Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites.

In the reading for today, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter, pun intended. He says, **“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”** (7:16). Our sinful hearts are already so defiled that there is nothing in all the world that can further defile us.

We often think the other way. We think of our hearts as a blank slate, or maybe even morally good. Both of these ideas are wrong.

The blank slate idea is that we start out morally neutral. Then we accumulate either good works or sins. Our sins make us dirty. Little sins give us a little dirt, and big sins pile on the filth, but if we do some good works, then we can get ourselves clean. This, of course, is false.

Or it's kind of like a bank account. You start out with a deposit. That would be your good works. And then you make some more deposits, but you also make some withdrawals. Withdrawals would be your sins. You have some of both, but as long as your deposits outweigh your withdrawals, you're in good shape. You just have to make sure the good outweighs the bad. If you start going in the wrong direction, or if you overdraft your account, you're in trouble. That's the blank slate idea, and I think most people think this way, but it's wrong. Our hearts are not blank slates.

There's another view gaining momentum that's even farther from the truth. It's the idea that we are morally good. This one appeals to us because it works out to the conclusion that we never have to deal with our sin. In fact, the things we once called sins are actually virtues. That's pretty handy. It starts with the assumption that our hearts are good, and then it says to us, “Follow your heart kid, and you'll never go wrong” (*The Sandlot*). This is foolish. Jesus teaches us that our hearts defile us. But my generation kind of grew up on this idea that we should follow our hearts. Maybe it existed before my generation, but I wasn't there to experience it. And then the generation after mine got an even heavier dose. So now we see and hear this everywhere. “Follow your heart.” This is the worst advice ever. But we're so committed to the belief that the heart is good, that when evil things flow from it, we call them good. We have to, because if we recognize these evil things as being evil, we will have to conclude that our hearts are not really good. If we want to keep our delusion that our hearts are good, we have to falsely label the fruit of our hearts. For example, lust comes from the heart. And what do we call it? “Love,” though it's anything but. Greed comes from the heart, and we call it “ambition.” Sensuality comes from the heart, and we call it “living in the moment.” Pride comes from the heart, and we call it ...

well ... “pride,” but we just pretend that pride is a virtue instead of a vice. We’re so committed to the belief that our hearts are good that when evil fruit flows from our hearts, we pretend it is actually good.

But this is not true. We need to be honest about ourselves. And, actually, as Christians, we have the freedom to be honest about ourselves. We don’t have to pretend that we’re okay. The cross gives us freedom to acknowledge reality. It gives us the freedom to see the world as it really is. And it especially gives us the freedom to see our hearts for what they really are. Jesus died for our sin and rose again; therefore, we can confess our sin without fear.

We can even admit that our sin problem is not just isolated mistakes that occur here and there. But we can admit that we are corrupt at our core. Our hearts are wicked. We were born this way. And being born this way is not some excuse to justify our condition as being okay. Being born this way means that we are not right and we never have been right. We were conceived as sinners (Ps. 51:5). The wickedness has been there from day one. So it is not the things outside of us that defile us. It has always been the wicked corruption within our own hearts. **“From within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness”** (7:21-22). Things that go into us cannot defile us, because we are already thoroughly defiled.

I was trying to think of something in our world to illustrate this defilement. And there might be a better illustration out there, but the thing I thought of was porta-potties. And I apologize to anyone who may own stock in a porta-potty company. I’m also not opposed, in principle, to porta-potties. When you need one, you need one, and you’re glad it’s there. But there’s really nothing you can put into a porta-potty that will defile it.

We were biking on our vacation last week. When we stopped for a break, Peter—he’s three years old—spotted a porta-potty and really wanted to use it. He’d never used a porta-potty before, so we wanted to gain that experience. I don’t think he really needed to go, so I was kind of annoyed. If he were fully potty-trained, I would have told him to hold it. If we were not trying to train him, I would have told him to go in his diaper. But in the middle of potty-training, you want to encourage them. So I let him use it. And I couldn’t let him go in there alone, because someone needed to be there to say, “Don’t touch that.” So I went in with him. And, of course, he needed a fresh diaper afterward, so I walked out of there with the old diaper, looking for a garbage can, but there was no garbage can. And I don’t know if you’re supposed to put diapers in a porta-potty, but I thought, “It’s not gonna make it worse.” Because there’s nothing that you can put into a porta-potty that will defile it any more than it already is. And that’s the best illustration I can think of right now for the human heart.

Your heart is like a well-used porta-potty. But it’s not like you start out as a fresh porta-potty. No, it’s more like, from the very beginning, we are a porta-potty that had been placed in a city park twenty years ago and then forgotten by the porta-potty company. That’s our starting point. There’s nothing you can put in that porta-potty to defile it any further. But if some punk kids come along and tip over that porta-potty, it will defile everything around it. That’s the human heart. That’s your heart and my heart. **“For from within, out of the heart of man, come [all these evil things], ... and they defile a person”** (7:21, 23).

We always want to notice what sins a passage calls us to repent of. And here it’s pretty easy, because Jesus lists a whole bunch of them: **“Evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.”** It’s kind of

interesting: whenever the Bible has a big long dirty list of sins, there are usually one or two thrown in there that don't really seem like a big deal to us. And I think the purpose of this is to not let anyone off the hook. If you take a really narrow view of the commandments, you might think, *I haven't murdered anyone, robbed any banks, or cheated on my spouse*. Or maybe you have; I don't know. But even if you have not committed those sins, Jesus lists more sins that I am quite certain do not let anyone off the hook. We won't examine the entire list, but we'll consider a few of them.

Jesus starts with evil thoughts. We might think, *What's wrong with evil thoughts? As long as I don't do the evil things, there's no harm*. False. God sees the heart. He sees that our evil thoughts come from our evil hearts. And they do work out to evil actions. Evil actions don't just pop out of thin air. They come from evil thoughts.

And Jesus lists coveting too. Surely, if there's a harmless sin, it must be coveting, right? No. Coveting is really the same as idolatry. It's worshipping false gods, but without realizing the things we covet are gods. When we covet someone or something, we're really expecting that person or thing to satisfy our hearts or protect us from harm. To covet means that we fear, love, or trust something created over the Creator of all things. And coveting, like evil thoughts, also leads to sinful actions. Coveting someone else's spouse leads to enticing that spouse away. And coveting someone else's possessions leads to theft or cheating our neighbor out of something. It is not a harmless sin.

Envy is similar to coveting, but there's a subtle difference. Coveting focuses on the person or thing we want to obtain. Envy focuses on the person who has what we want. So it's closely connected with hatred. There's another Lutheran pastor by the name of Will Weedon, and I heard him explain envy in a very insightful way. He described it as "pain over someone else's good fortune." I thought that was very insightful, because, first of all, it's true, and we've all experienced that. And second, it really highlights the depravity of envy. Why would we experience pain over someone else's good fortune? It really makes no sense; it's not logical. But I know we have all experienced this emotion. *If I can't have something, then nobody should be allowed to have it*. That's depraved. Instead, we should rejoice when good things happen to those around us, even if that good thing never happens to us. So the feeling of envy illustrates what Jesus says about our hearts. We really are corrupt to our core. Every evil thing that defiles us comes from within.

Sensuality is another subtle sin. When you hear the word "sensuality," you might think of sexual sins. And sensuality does include those sins, but the idea is much broader. Think of sensuality as the desire to gratify our senses. Sensuality is when we make a god out of feeling good. It's when feeling good becomes more important than loving God and loving our neighbors. It's an idolatry of self.

In this way, it's actually kind of similar to pride. Pride is not simply thinking that you're really good at something. It's also not the sense of accomplishment you have when you do something well. I think it's okay to be joyful when you've done something well. But you should also be equally joyful when someone else does something well. But if we fixate on what we have done, that turns into pride. And pride includes more than just a fixation on our accomplishments. Pride is self-idolatry. It is worship of ourselves. Sometimes that takes the form of puffing ourselves up and thinking we're better than we really are. But pride is usually more subtle than that. Worshipping ourselves simply means that we seek our own good above any other good. We love ourselves more than anyone else. Pride is selfishness. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis calls pride "The Great Sin." And he's not the first Christian to do this. He follows a long line of

Christian teachers, but he explains it clearly and in a way that causes us to realize that this is true for all of us. I highly recommend reading it. The world sees nothing wrong with this kind of pride. How often have you heard someone say, “You have to do what’s best for you.” Maybe you’ve said it yourself. It should make us cringe. When people say this, I think it’s because they live that way, and if they tell others to live the same way, then they can justify their selfish way of life. But the Bible never speaks this way. The greatest commandment is, “Love the Lord your God ... [and] your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). I have not yet found the commandment in the Bible to love ourselves.

We’ll talk about one more sin in Jesus’ list: foolishness. In biblical thought, foolishness is basically synonymous with unbelief. “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no god’ ” (Ps. 14:1; 53:1). On the flip-side, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 110:10; Prov. 9:10). Foolishness is not just doing things that turn out later to be a bad idea. Foolishness is living without any thought of God. Foolishness is living as if the natural world is all there is. Foolishness is following our own desires, as if that’s all we need to care about. This foolishness comes from within our darkened hearts. Wisdom recognizes that our heavenly Father is our Creator, Jesus is our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit is our comforter and teacher. Wisdom recognizes that this world is his, we are his, everything we have is a gift from him, and the people we interact with every day are his creatures who are also loved by him. This is wisdom. But foolishness sees God in none of this. And foolishness, like the other twelve sins Jesus lists, comes from within.

Jesus calls us to repent of these sins. What does that mean? And how can we repent of these sins? If Jesus is right, and these thirteen vices come from within? Where will we find the strength to repent of these things? Sometimes we think that repentance means that we stop doing the bad things and start doing the good things. We think that repentance means turning from sin to good works. But this can never be. When we look in our hearts, all we find is the sin that defiles us. If we try to turn from sin to good works, we will only be turning to other sins, because that is our nature. That is what is within us. So repentance is a different kind of turning. It’s turning away from sin, it’s even turning away from our efforts to be better, to faith in Jesus Christ. Repentance is not turning from sin to good works. It is turning from sin to Jesus.

If all of these defilements come from within, the answer cannot possibly come from within. The solution must come from outside of us. This is why it’s important for us to recognize that our defilement comes from within. We need to know that we cannot find the answer within ourselves. Trying to clean ourselves up with what we find in our own hearts would be like trying to clean a porta-potty with what you find inside.

Instead, it is the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). Remember what God did with your defilement. Remember what he did with your sin. He laid it on Jesus. Jesus bore that sin in his body (1 Peter 2:24). He was defiled with your sin. And he shed his blood to cleanse you from that sin. If you look within yourself, you will still find corruption. But from outside of you, flowing from the cross of Calvary, Jesus gives you his shed blood that cleanses you from every sin. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.