

"Lord God, You have appointed me as a bishop and pastor in Your Church, but You see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked Your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon Your Word. Use me as Your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all."

"Sir, we would see Jesus."

JESUS IS CHALLENGED ABOUT HIS DISCIPLES' DIRTY HANDS

Gospel -- Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

1 The Pharisees and some of the experts in the law came from Jerusalem and gathered around Jesus. 2 They saw some of his disciples eating bread with unclean (that is, unwashed) hands. 3 In fact, the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they scrub their hands with a fist, holding to the traditions of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions they adhere to, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, kettles, and dining couches. 5 The Pharisees and the experts in the law asked Jesus, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders? Instead they eat bread with unclean hands." 6 He answered them, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. 7 They worship me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were doctrines.' 8 You abandon God's commandment but hold to human tradition like the washing of pitchers and cups, and you do many other such things. 14 He called the crowd to him again and said, "Everyone, listen to me and understand. 15 There is nothing outside of a man that can make him unclean by going into him. But the things that come out of a man are what makes a man unclean. 21 In fact, from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, slander, arrogance, and foolishness. 23 All these evil things proceed from within and make a person unclean.

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Do you ever wonder how hospitals get clean linens? Let me tell you about the worst summer job I had, cleaning hospital laundry... I guess we had to have a low germ limit.

Where is your germ limit? We all have one. We all have a point where we won't approach because it isn't clean. Or if we do, we need that hand sanitizer. Proof positive is that face you're about to make when I remind you that every door handle is germier than just about any bathroom appliance you can think of.

We also have a germ limit morally speaking. We have a line we won't cross, but also a line that we each will cross. It's different for all of us. Are our limits and lines a little blurred lately? What won't you get close to? What truly contaminates you?

The answer is in our gospel today ...

Jesus Finds The Germs

Jesus locates human error and sin; really, Jesus diagnoses their divine germaphobia.

1. Rules cooked up by men

A natural question at this point may be, "Why doesn't Jesus want us to wash our hands?" My mother wants me to wash my hands. I don't want to eat with dirty hands and get dirt in my mouth. Cleanliness is next to godliness, right? So why doesn't Jesus join the Pharisees in telling those disciples to wash up before they eat communally??

At this point we must see the context, and we must point out that it's not bacterial, but ritual, cleanliness Jesus was concerned about. The word used here for "unclean" could be translated "not kosher," or "common." Certain foods and animals caused this kind of uncleanness. If you accidentally got snake meat or a flea in your mouth, it was technically unclean. Also, people, objects, and places that you came into contact made you guilty, sinful, and lose holiness. Then you would need a Leviticus-5 sin offering to be made clean again.

On top of those divinely identified "germs," the Jews added their own rules. {{{Explain Mishnah 'Yadaim.'}}} This was the business of splitting hairs "to build a hedge around the written Torah and guard against any possible infringement of the Torah by ignorance or accident" ... The hedge around the Torah. They were saying, "Jesus, your disciples have the germs." Jesus was saying, "That's not really where the germs are." "Well, they at least have cooties." "God never said there were cooties, just germs. Moses clearly stated there's no room to put cooties on top of germs, because the cooties don't exist. Germs actually make you sin-sick." The cooties are the manmade laws, the germs are actual sins God warned against.

How do human rules stack up to God's Law? If you washed your hands to keep customs to keep charity, peace, and concord, for the glory of God, that would be a beautiful washing. It would be a washing not just of your hands and feet, but your head and heart, soul and body (see John 13:9). But the greatest outrage is to violate the commands of God because of human traditions. That would be to place God below man. That eventually would mean that where there is sin, man would decree it not to be sin. Where there is righteousness, man would deny that righteousness. This is adding cooties on top of germs.

What did this make the Pharisees? These religious and political leaders of the day were proud (Luke 18:11), greedy (Luke 16:14), selfish (Luke 11:43), and self-indulgent (Matt. 23:23). Like unwashed cups, clean on the outside, but dirty on the inside (Matt. 23:25). They were white-washed tombs (Matt 23:27), decorative to the public but dead in private. They were straining at Jesus' gnat while gulping their own camels. They were trying to check Jesus' speck while sinning nothing but logs. Jesus would finally tell them they were on the way to hell (Matt. 23:15).

Can you tell the difference? Are you ignoring the real germs; meanwhile, you fuss over the cooties? You follow human ritual while rejecting the Laws of God? This may happen when you're careful to impress at church, but your inner sinner rages at home. You may go through the motions, answering all the Bible class questions, volunteering to do the most things; but the rest of the week you give up the battle. You may be a careful financial giver; but you hold grudges, bitterness, and pride because you suspect others are not. You may even be ritually thinking about lunch or football or your week instead of what God has to say to you in this Word of His.

Jesus really gets at the problem when He says the Pharisees' worship is not worship, because He's not just getting at their problem. He's getting at the heart of our problem, too. Their hearts were like our hearts,

2. Hearts to be cleaned up by God

[[[Read 6b, 15.]]] Jesus Christ acknowledged that they honor, they fear, they serve, they are pious, and holy. Their intentions were good. They were after the true God.

So how can worship of the true God be in vain? The worship of the Pharisees was well-intentioned, but it wasn't true worship. They weren't breaking the First Commandment as definitionally they were breaking the Second Commandment. It's not that they had the wrong God in mind; it's that they meant to seat God on thrones of stone instead of the throne of a clean heart.

This is where the sin is located, this is the problem: their germs -- their sin -- was in the heart. [[[Read 21-23]]]

The sin was located in the heart, and Jesus chose to list sins. This wasn't an unusual list. Each sin, however, is an abstraction, not a concrete thing to touch, but something seated in the attitude, emotions, and will of the heart. Many of these sins we could find excuses for, conditioned by environment. Many of them may begin with good intentions, or at least well-reasoned self-service. But no one would do these sins unless they first thought them and willed them. The thinking, emoting, willing, and attitude for these sins is in the heart.

This is why your preachers at this church have always endeavored to get to the heart -- not just the hands or feet or face -- of the sin. The best preachers go to the heart of the matter and to the heart of the sinner. God's Word is meant to push us to our limits and boundaries -- where we believe our artificial religion starts and God's purview ends -- and make us poor in spirit, humble, mournful, and disgusted over our own sin. God wants us to really hear it, really listen, really know our diagnosis that sin is in the heart. He wants us to follow the prognosis that it will eventually lead to hell.

That way, our hearts will search for and listen to the true prescription.

Where is your germ limit? What will you not touch? Are you there right now, in your heart? Are you poor in spirit, humble, mournful, and disgusted over your own sin? Are you blistering for the true prescription, unlike these Pharisees?

Thank The Lord Jesus Christ for His germ limit. He wasn't worried one iota about the germs, let alone the cooties. He became a human with a right spirit and a true heart. His heart beat for us to roll up His sleeves and be around the germs, touch the human door handles, to cleanse the whole operation. No germaphobia here, not with our Savior. It wasn't only what they put in His body that saved us -- not just the nails, the spear, the splinters on the cross. It was the lifeblood He poured, the words that He cried, and the grace and mercy behind them that really cleanse a sinner. It wasn't done to horrify us or worry us, it was done to save us and deliver us. It washed every corner and dusted every shelf in our hearts of false worship.

Take your sins to Him today -- take Him the ones on the inside that you hide from us on the outside. The ones you may have not really thought about when you confessed your sins before. The ones that are between you and your God. Bare your soul and take these sins to Jesus. He destroys germs. He delivers sinners. He loves hearts. He remakes them. For you. For once, and for all. For good. Amen.