

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: The Clean & The Unclean

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

7 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus ² and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

⁶ He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

*“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*

*⁷ They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.’*

⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

¹⁴ Again 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.” ¹⁶

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.”

I attended the Youth Night hosted by the Blanchard family this past Wednesday evening. During the event, we held a Youth Olympic Pentathlon, and before diving into the games, there was a moment for each team to

decide which country they would represent. The kids were brainstorming which country name they should choose for their teams. After a bit of time, one child seriously exclaimed, "Alright! Our team's country name is Georgia!" To this, another child responded, "Hey, Georgia is not a country; it's a state in the U.S." The first child replied, "Okay, got it! Then from now on, our team is Alabama."

As time passed, one team decided on Germany, and the other chose Mars. I found it interesting to see which countries the kids selected, as it gave a glimpse into how they perceived different nations. It also led me to reflect on the images and impressions I hold about other countries. Before coming to the U.S., I had the opportunity to visit several countries, like Israel, Haiti, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, France, and the U.K., either for travel or mission trips, staying anywhere from a week to a month.

I carry certain impressions and images of these countries based on my experiences there. However, what's fascinating is that I also have images and impressions of countries I've never visited. And upon further reflection, I realized that it's not just about other countries—I have similar impressions about different regions within South Korea. Although I was born and raised in Seoul, I haven't experienced every city in Korea. Yet, I hold certain images like, "People from this region speak slowly," or "People from that area have strong accents that are hard to understand," or "People from this city are known for being quick-tempered."

This extends beyond just countries and regions. I discovered that I also hold images, impressions, and stereotypes about how men and women should behave, often without even realizing it. This made me realize how the influence of mass media and social media can subtly instill certain images, impressions, and stereotypes within us, often without our awareness. Today, the process by which mass media creates such images is sometimes referred to as "labeling." While mass media isn't the only source of these impressions, its influence is significant. Labeling isn't inherently bad, but when misused, it can lead to stereotypes and discrimination, which is why I believe we need to be cautious.

In Jesus' time, the Pharisees and scribes were like the mass media of today, engaging in labeling. According to their declarations, they determined what was right and wrong, clean and unclean. For them, everything was clear-cut based on the law. They believed that following the law was the path to salvation, and if someone didn't follow it, they were abandoned by God. As a result, they avoided the poor, the sick, tax collectors, and sinners because, to them, these people were sinners already rejected by God.

The Pharisees and scribes maintained their authority and lived well without any problems until Jesus began his ministry. But as stories spread about how Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry and the poor, and even walked on water—stories that were hard to believe—many people began to follow Jesus and listen to his teachings. This caused the Pharisees and scribes to feel a sense of crisis, an uncomfortable and complex emotion that is difficult to describe. I suspect that what they felt was close to jealousy.

Anyway, they went to meet Jesus in Jerusalem. But what they saw in Jesus was different from what they had imagined. Perhaps they expected Jesus to be similar to them. However, the Jesus they encountered was dining with those they considered unworthy—poor, uneducated people, and sinners. Despite their belief that one must wash up to the elbows before eating and bathe after returning from the marketplace, Jesus' disciples ate without washing their hands, and their clothes didn't look clean.

So they went to Jesus and asked why his disciples didn't wash their hands before eating, as the law required. In response, Jesus introduced a new standard of cleanliness and impurity. Verses 15-16 say: "Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."

What does it mean to be defiled? On the first floor of my parsonage, there's a room with a bathroom that I use as a study. It's where I prepare for worship, write prayers, and craft sermons. But sometimes, when I'm busy, I don't have time to tidy up my desk. After a month or two, papers and books pile up, making the room look quite messy. Eventually, I'll set aside a day to gather all the unnecessary papers, throw them away, and organize the books back onto the shelves. When the desk is clear, I feel at peace.

In this context, to be defiled means to be filled with something. Specifically, when we are full of self-centered thoughts, selfishness, and self-priority, we are in a defiled state. On the other hand, to be clean means to be emptied. Through the process of self-denial, we can empty ourselves of the selfish, self-centered thoughts that fill us, leading to cleanliness. In other words, this is the process of becoming holy.

I believe that one's actions reveal what truly makes them a Christian. Let's consider two people. Both faithfully attend church and identify as Christians. However, one person's actions are marked by evil thoughts and behaviors such as sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. Meanwhile, the other person's actions are characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Which of these two do you think better understands and follows Jesus?

You've already seen, heard, felt, and experienced many things in life. I, too, am filled with countless images, impressions, and prejudices based on my experiences. These aspects are natural parts of life, and they may seem unavoidable. However, when we become trapped by these things, believing that our experiences and prejudices are the only truths, many problems can arise. As Christians and followers of Jesus, I believe the time has come for us to begin emptying ourselves of our self-centered thoughts, selfishness, and self-priorities, little by little, and to grow in likeness to Jesus.