

Pentecost 15—B
Mark 7:1-8,14,15,21-23
It Came From Within

There's one thing I want you to give very serious consideration to today, and it's this question: How is your heart? Of course, I'm not talking about that organ in our bodies that beats. I mean: How is your heart? How is that seat of the will and emotions... that inner you? How is your heart?

Here's why I ask the question. We don't think about this nearly as often as we should. We certainly think about our behavior. We know we need to watch what we do. And we have little sayings about watching our behavior, like the golden rule: "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you." So we're used to watching our behavior.

We also recognize the need to watch what we say. And we have little sayings to remind us of that as well: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Okay, so let's manage my behavior and my speech very well. Problem fixed?

No! In most cases, what we learn to do in modifying our behavior and speech is simply to create better filters. In other words, there's the things we want to do and want to say, but we hold ourselves back. We think it, but we don't say it or do it. And when a person successfully establishes the proper filters when they're around others, we think they are pretty good people.

But the truth is, behind those filters, behind the façade, behind the good looking exterior is a rotten interior... is evil... is a corrupt, wicked, sinful heart. What remains and lurks inside of us is downright scary.

You know this is true: Sooner or later, something gets past our filters. We say or do something that usually we filter. And we're embarrassed. Where did THAT come from? We wonder. Or at the very least, those who witnessed it wonder where that came from. "That's not me. I'm so sorry." And we vow to raise the shields and refine the filter so that doesn't happen again.

But let's be honest. Where did that come from?" It came from within. It came from our heart.

Perhaps nowhere is this truth more evident than in marriage. When dating and during courtship, we make sure all filters are firmly in place. When dating, a person is polite, generous, helpful, romantic, encouraging, and more. Then once a couple is married... particularly many years of marriage, the filters start to come down. It takes effort to keep our filters up. So at home, around the people we're most familiar with, we tend to let the filters down, and you see the true person. You see a person's heart.

I hear it all the time. "She/He's not the person I married." Well, yes it is. Same person, now without the filters. Where does this new, ugly behavior come from? Did they change? No! They were always like that. You're just seeing behind the filters.

Could this really be, that we have an evil heart? That our horrible words and behavior actually have a deeper cause... it comes from within? Some may push back on this and say, "No way! My mama always told me I was a good boy. I know I'm good deep down inside! In fact, I believe all human beings are good deep down inside."

Let's go to a higher authority and talk about this in a little more depth, because, what I'm saying comes straight from Jesus. While we may be primarily concerned about what is observable on the outside... while we monitor and strive to control what makes it to the

outside... Jesus says the real issue is our heart. Our heart needs cleaning... what's behind the filter needs cleaning.

So let me ask you again: How is your heart? Today we look at some verses from Mark 7. We'll start at the first verse: *"The Pharisees and some of the experts of the law came from Jerusalem and gathered around Jesus. They saw some of his disciples eating bread with unclean (that is, unwashed) hands. In fact, the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they scrub their hands with a fist, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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"* (1-4). So understand the issue here. The Pharisees were not accusing the disciples of poor hygiene. The washing they were failing to do was the proper ritualistic, ceremonial washing. In other words, the Pharisees were saying that unless you first perform the proper washing ritual in the proper way before eating your food, you will not be right with God. They saw the disciples as being openly disobedient to God.

"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.' 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. They worship me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were doctrines.' 'You abandoned God's commandment but hold to human tradition like the washing of pitchers and cups, and you do many other such things'" (5-8). Did you get that? *"You abandoned God's commandment but hold to human tradition."* That is a profound statement I really want you to think about. Because it's not only the Pharisees substitute God's Word and promises for human traditions. Truth is, we all gravitate toward this sort of thing.

Let me illustrate. Is praying before meals a good thing? Yes. Is it a godly thing? Yes. Can it turn into a ritualistic tradition of men? Yes it can. The meal is about to begin. One of the kids sneaks a bite. "Hey, we haven't prayed yet!" Busted. Someone noticed. We all pray what we even call "The Common Table Prayer." Everyone recites it together... NOW we can begin the meal! Then this sometimes happens: Five minutes later, someone pipes up: "Hey, we forgot to pray!" What just happened? We prayed before eating, but we did it in a ritualistic way. We followed a tradition and by doing so felt we had the favor of God. We are able to do it mindlessly. That's dangerous. Is it possible for a person to eat with a thankful heart to God without first audible and visible bowing and praying: "Come Lord Jesus...?" Sure it is! Have we made this a human ritual?

Let me tell you another one, and this one may surprise you. A person isn't in church for a half a year. A couple people notice and talk about it. "I haven't seen so and so in months!" "Yeah, me neither! I'm worried that they're not in church." Then, sure enough, a week or two later, that person shows up in church. The two who had the conversation earlier say: "Hey, did you notice they were back in church?" "Yeah, that's great!" All problems are resolved. The person must be back right with God again, because now they were physically present within these four walls.

This is a little challenging to think about, but let me ask you: Is attendance at church our goal? If a person who hasn't come in six months attends a service, is all well? Let's say a person attends church nearly every Sunday. Does that mean we have a strong believer who knows the word of God AND trusts it AND lives in their daily life? Or is it possible that sometimes we turn attendance at church into a human ritual... simply perform the act and you are right with God? Is that our goal? No, look at our church's vision, and you'll see that our

goal is to connect people to Christ. What we should be asking is: Is that person who missed six months and now showed up again: are they strongly connected to Christ? Is their connection alive and growing? And we can ask the same question of the person attending weekly. Are they going through a ritual? Going through the motions to feel better about themselves? Or are they engaged in active, heart-worship? Are they actively listening to God's Word and applying it in their daily lives? In other words: how is their heart? How is your heart?

"He called the crowd to him again and said, 'Everyone listen to me and understand. 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 make a man unclean'" (14-15). External rituals don't make us clean or unclean before God. What's in our heart? What comes from within? This is where we must focus our attention!

Then Jesus just says it bluntly. What is in our hearts? Are people truly good deep down inside? Listen: *"In fact, from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts"* (21). Wait... your thoughts don't come from your heart. Your hearts come from your brain. No, you have evil thoughts because of what is in your heart. We think: "Well, I need to put more filters on." But Jesus said it's our heart. You may have a sophisticated filter, but the problem is the heart.

"Sexual sins, theft, murder, adultery" (21). Okay, this, I see. This is a wicked. But Jesus says they did these horrible things because of what is within. It came from within.

"Greed, wickedness (evil actions), deceit (cheating), unrestrained immorality (promiscuity; shameless lust), envy, slander (cursing), arrogance and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and make a person unclean" (22-23). A cardiologist wants to get a look at a patient's heart. He can't look at it directly, so he uses a stethoscope to listen. He uses ultrasound and cat scans to see. Likewise, we can see the inside of our heart... what we're truly like on the inside. But what gives us a glimpse of what's on our inside is what comes out. Do you see in your life any of those things mentioned by Jesus? And his list was by no means inclusive! There are many more sins he could have mentioned! Are you becoming convinced yet that your heart is unclean? That all the bad you do comes from within?

Now... what can be done about our unclean, dirty, wicked, broken, rebellious hearts? So we're not talking about how to better filter your language. How to better filter your actions? No... how do you clean up that dirty thing deep down inside?

The Bible talks about this frequently. Let me share a few passages with you. Proverbs 20:9: *"Who can say, 'I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin'?"* Can we all start by admitting that our hearts are not pure? They are not clean. We are not sinless? Not only are our filters imperfect, but far more important, our very nature and being is corrupt and wicked? That's a hard thing to say, but God leads us to say it. You are not good deep down inside... just the opposite. No one can say they have kept their heart pure.

But Jesus says this. Matthew 5:8: *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."* In light of what we've been talking about, isn't that a terrifying passage? Who gets to see God and live in his eternal presence? Those who have a pure heart. Those who need no filters because they are clean on the inside. But we're not. We deserve to be cut off from God.

Ezekiel 18:31: *"Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel?"* Okay, we're getting

somewhere here. If you will live, we must rid of all our offenses and get a new heart and spirit.

Later, Ezekiel says (36:26): *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”* So having our heart cleaned is not something we can effect by keeping certain rituals and trying do the right thing. God gives us a new heart.

In Psalm 51:10 David understands this and so asks: *“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”*

We’re almost there. How does God create that new heart in us? How does he wash us clean? Titus 3:5: *“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”* God saved us. Why? Because he is merciful. We were helpless so he became helpful. He provided what we were lacking. He cleaned up what is impossible for us to clean. He gave his only Son as our substitute. Jesus was pure and clean... always. He offered that pure life to us and for us. Jesus went to the cross where he bled and died for us, taking our uncleanness upon himself. Jesus cried out from the cross “It is finished!” The cleansing process was complete. A Roman soldier made sure he was dead. A spear up through his side... and most think it must have pierced his heart, brought out a flow of blood and water. His shed blood the payment price for our sin. It is what cleanses our hearts. It is what saves us. It is the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has created in you a reliance upon Jesus for your clean heart... and clean it is.

Acts 15:9: *“God made no distinction between us and them (Jew and Gentile), for he purified their hearts by faith.”* Hearts purified by faith in Jesus Christ! Connected to Christ by faith, your heart is declared to be pure and clean by God almighty.

Friends, how is your heart? By God’s grace in Christ, it is clean. Now in thanksgiving for Jesus, listen to Proverbs 4:23: *“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.”* Above all else, guard your heart. Don’t forfeit the free cleansing that God gave you in Christ Jesus. Don’t soil your clean heart! Guard your heart! Guard the most precious gift God could have given.

Hymns: 459, 471