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Mark 7: 1 - 5, 14 - 23

** The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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.)

** 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?"

(vs.14) ...Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them..."

** After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

** He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

** (blank) I find that I have a lot of different 'names', or, ways that people refer to me. (Ha!...probably some that I don't want to know!) When I introduce myself to someone, I simply give my name, no titles, or prefixes. But when people find out that I'm clergy, then it often gets interesting. I hear, "Pastor Steve" (which I kind of like), "Rev. Donat" (which still sounds to me like a reference to someone else), often just "Reverend" (which is a lot to live up to) ... then, I'll get the occasional "Father" (That was the source of a joke once... some of you might remember Canning Kraft, an old gentleman with a huge personality who was part of our church until he passed away a number of years ago. He just 'filled a room' when he entered. I was visiting him at Jefferson Hospital once, and a nurse came in, and asked Canning if I was his son. To which he replied, "No, he's my father." We both thought that was pretty funny.)

There was a woman (a friend) from my first church down in Alloway, who, from my very first day there, referred to me simply as "Preacher". (I can still hear her voice in my head!) Now, that is *part* of what I do, as far as, how my week is structured, but in another sense, that title goes right to the heart of *why* I entered ministry in the first place. I know I've shared this with you before - basically, I went into the ministry because of a desire that God laid on my heart early in my life to share the Good News of

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Jesus Christ that I had found, with other people. So, all the administrative stuff, staffing issues, money related things, budgeting, fundraising, scheduling, programing, etc., I do mostly because I *have to*, (and I know how important all that is), but even to this day, my main source of joy in ministry is to proclaim - either in preaching, or in one-on-one conversations with hurting people - to share the Good News of our forgiveness in Jesus Christ, the news of Hope that this world is not all there is, the News of God's eternal plan to restore all Creation into what it was originally intended to be - and how God wants to start that healing right now.

That's why I do what I do, but, as a "preacher" with that purpose in mind ... I've always sensed a constant tension that has always existed (but it seems to me is becoming even more acute as time goes on) in the attempt to share this News with the world. This Gospel was meant for everyone - I'm convinced that it is the key to life. The tension is this: I hold what I'm certain is a wonderful treasure, and I want to share it, it's free(!) but the world is less and less willing (or, perhaps, able) these days to receive it.

Now, that's a complicated issue, I know... but at least part of the reason for that is that the world in general, and especially our Western Society (which has lived under the influence of Christians for quite some time) feels that they *already* know the Christian message. And they are also pretty sure that it is not Good News, it is actually *Bad News*. That, I believe, is at least partially due to the way we've presented the Good News to our world, but it is also because the Good News does begin, in a sense, with Bad News.

The 'Bad News' is that we're messed up! *All of us!* (Someone once said, "The Good News is that the Bad News isn't all there is!") My heart is often heavy when I hear Christians attempt to share the "Gospel" with the world, but get entirely hung up on the 'we are all messed up part', by focusing on the individual 'sins' of people instead of our 'Sin' problem. Does that make any sense to you? What I mean is that the world mostly hears from the Christians *our* judgment on *their* sins. Remember that very unsettling book by Lyons and Kinamen "UnChristian", where they found as a result of extensive polling, that the #1 perception of Christians from people 18 - 28 years old is "Judgmental".

Too often, again sadly, our judgment is very selective, because it comes with our inability to see the 'log in our own eyes', to use Jesus' term. As we point out what we consider to be the 'sins' of the world -

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mostly excluding our own - then people feel they can (and do) decide whether or not they think these things are, in fact, sins. Very often - which is pretty obvious to anyone who watches about 10 minutes of TV - they conclude that quite a bit of what we call sin isn't *wrong* at all. End result? They also conclude, "*I have no need of Christianity.*" I'm fine. I may not be perfect (who is?), but I'm certainly *not* a 'sinner'.

In the Gospel of John (16:8) Jesus stated very clearly that it is the job, the function, of the Holy Spirit to ** convict people of sin. [*When he* (i.e., the Holy Spirit) *comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment...*] It seems to me that a lot of people feel that the Holy Spirit is not up to this task, and needs our help. But our shaming, accusations, and finger pointing is not going to bring *anyone* to repentance. *We* can't do that.

** When we live a life that is truly *different* from the rest of the world - holy lives, righteous lives - we will stand out like ... a city on a hill! It is through acts of love, compassion, and the witness of our own Christ - like values that gains us a hearing with the world... and when we do that (when we get the world's 'ear'), if we totally focus on the 'sins' (i.e., the individual ways that our *Sin* nature is manifested) then we are *not* offering Good News to anyone. We're offering a life of guilt, judgment, sin management, and frustration.

See, we all have a very warped sense of right and wrong apart from the Holy Spirit. So, not only for a 'preacher' but for anyone who wants to share the Good News of Grace and hope with a lost and hurting world, how do you even start that conversation today? How do you tell a person about their need for God, when, in their inner being they are convinced that they are 'fine'? How do you share this with someone who has learned through years of practice and from the example of family, friends, and the media to disconnect from that inner witness that God has placed in each of us? How do you tell the people in this world - *our* neighbors - that God's Good News begins with some bad news - i.e., that we're all sinners, and the result of our sin is that we are separated from God? We are not what we can be, and surely not even close to what God intended for us to be in Creation?

** How do you do that? Some feel that the answer to that question is to shout louder at the world... I've never felt that way, which I know frustrates some of 'my flock' at times... I think maybe instead, instead of shouting, we need to start weeping for the world as we earnestly pray for its Light, and try to find

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more ways to love them as our Lord does.

Donald Miller, in his book Searching for God Knows What wrote about a very disturbing image that he keeps on his computer desktop of a young boy who was born with extreme physical deformities due to the radiation from the Chernobyl meltdown. As disturbing as that picture is, he feels that this is a necessary daily reminder to him of the brokenness of all human beings, even if we can't see the damage. He writes -

*** ...I believe, without question, that none of us are happy in the way we were supposed to be happy. I believe that nobody on this planet is so secure, so confident in their state that they feel the way Adam and Eve felt in the Garden before they knew they were naked. I believe we are in the wreckage of a war, a kind of Hiroshima, a kind of Mount Saint Helens, with souls distorted like the children of Chernobyl.*

***As terrible as it is to think about these things, as ugly as it is to face them, I have to see the world this way in order for it to make sense. I have to believe something happened, and we are walking around holding our wounds¹.*

He is alluding in this to what theologians call the Doctrine of Original Sin, which basically means that we understand that scripture teaches us that human beings are flawed and broken inside. That there is something within us that is warped, our 'moral compass' is unreliable, we are capable of choosing and doing the 'right things' (and sometimes we do) but, at some point, *every one of us* will fail to live up even to our *own* sense of morality, let alone God's. We're going to fall.

And without downplaying the importance of holiness (the standard for Christian living) *this*, really, is the problem that the Good News is addressing. Not just for us to be forgiven for particular sins (that's just part of it), but more so to find that the *power* of sin, the *principle* of sin within us has been broken - and we are now free to be the people God meant for us to be. Now, Miller is a Christian, but similar observations to his have been made by some surprising non-Christians. For example the philosopher Michael Ruse is quoted by the writers of a 2013 book, God and Evil in saying this -

¹ *Donald Miller, Searching for God Knows What (Nelson, 2004), p. 87-88*

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"With respect to the main claims of Christianity ... I am pretty atheistic I prefer the term 'skeptic' to describe my position I am an ardent evolutionist I think that science is the highest form of knowledge—I am a philosophical naturalist." And yet, [the editor's add] surprisingly, Ruse also ardently defends the biblical doctrine of original sin.

*** Ruse argues: "I think Christianity is spot on about original sin—how could one think otherwise, when the world's most civilized and advanced people (the people of Beethoven, Goethe, Kant) embraced that slime-ball Hitler and participated in the Holocaust? I think Saint Paul and the great Christian philosophers had real insights into sin and freedom and responsibility, and I want to build on this rather than turn from it".²*

There's an honesty in that statement that we would do well to contemplate. And the truth is, that we don't have to do too much inner contemplation to come to the conclusion that something within us is deeply amiss. Ruse is seeing that.

*** (blank) So did another man, a technology writer named Paul Miller. On April 30, 2012 Miller started a yearlong commitment to live without any contact with the internet. So he unplugged his Ethernet, shut off his WiFi, exchanged his smartphone with a dumb phone. He was looking for an escape from the hamster wheel of email, the false 'news' of FaceBook, the jabber of Twitter, the constant flood of information that he felt was "drowning his sanity."*

On May 1, 2013, he wrote an article titled "I'm here: back online after a year without the internet. And basically, the article was his admitting he has come to recognize that the deepest problems of his life weren't related to something 'outside of him'. The real problems in this life resided in his own heart.

What I do know is that I can't blame the internet, or any circumstance, for my problems. I have many of the same priorities I had before I left the internet: family, friends, work, learning. And I have no guarantee I'll stick with them when I get back on the internet—I probably won't, to be honest. But at least I'll know that it's not the internet's fault. I'll know who's responsible, and who can fix it.³

*** Does that sound familiar? It should, because it's exactly what Jesus told his his disciples in that*

² *Quoted in Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr., editors, [God and Evil](#) (IVP Books, 2013, page 126*

³ *Paul Miller, "I'm here: back online after a year without the internet," [The Verge](#) (5-1-13)*

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passage we just read from Mark 7. Some Pharisees complained that Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands before eating. Now, that, of course, was not specifically a health oriented practice (like today, we get grossed out when someone leaves the restroom without stopping at the sink!). This was a ceremonial washing - not just of their hands, but of the tableware (cups, pitchers, and kettles).

It was a way of life that should have had a positive effect on them - the point was simply to recognize the presence of God even in daily tasks like their eating and food preparation. The purpose of these rituals was to remind the people to give God thanks for the basic things in life, to recognize that all good gifts come ultimately from God's hand. But, like so many of our rituals, it had become rote to many of them, and the *keeping* of the the practice became more important than the *purpose* of the practice (which had become lost somewhere along the way.) And when they complained to Jesus about the lack of his disciple's compliance with this tradition, Jesus responds by telling them (1) that they don't keep all their own regulations, either. He gives an example of that and then says in verse 8 -

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

Then (2) he reminds, first the crowd listening in, and then the disciples in a private moment, that the 'outward' stuff in our lives is not what makes us clean or defiled. Rather, it is what *comes out* of a person that is important. What we *eat*, or, how we eat, what rituals we perform in the process it is not the important thing... because what comes out of us is a direct indication of the state of our heart.

*** "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person."*

So, Jesus is telling us: the *real* issue is that we all have a heart problem. All the evil of the world - all the sins ever committed - come from a hearts that are corrupt.

Dr. Dan Ariely is a professor of Behavior Economics at Duke University (I don't know what that is, but it sounds important). He has written a book called "The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves" - another 'secular' confirmation of what Jesus taught so long ago.

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Listen to this quote:

We tend to think that people are either honest or dishonest We like to believe that most people are virtuous, but a few bad apples spoil the bunch. If this were true, society might easily remedy its problems with cheating and dishonesty

But that is not how dishonesty works. Over the past decade or so, my colleagues and I have taken a close look at why people cheat, using a variety of experiments and looking at a panoply of unique data sets—from insurance claims to employment histories to the treatment records of doctors and dentists. *What we have found, in a nutshell:*

*** Everybody has the capacity to be dishonest, and almost everybody cheats—just by a little. Except for a few outliers at the top and bottom, the behavior of almost everyone is driven by two opposing motivations. On the one hand, we want to benefit from cheating and get as much money and glory as possible; on the other hand, we want to view ourselves as honest, honorable people. Sadly, it is this kind of small-scale mass cheating, not the high-profile cases, that is most corrosive to society.⁴*

Again, another confirmation that the Good News begins with Bad News... we are all messed up. It's not a popular concept, nobody really 'likes' to hear this, and it is one of those Christian teachings that even those of us who accept that statement at its face value, often have *eureka* moments at certain points in our lives, when we see the ugly remnant of our broken nature that is still there, when we thought we pretty much had it all together. And we're surprised at the extent of our brokenness.

In this week's Chapter of *King's Cross*, the book on which we are basing our summer sermons, Timothy Keller shares a teaching from a sermon that he had heard years ago by an Old Testament scholar named Ray Dillard. It is one of the most eye-opening things I've read in a long time... so I want to share with you Keller's remembrance of this message... Dillard, in his message was speaking about a prophecy from Zechariah 3, where he saw Joshua (who was the High Priest at that time) standing before the altar of God on the Day of Atonement. He began to explain in detail about the enormous amount of preparation that took place for a high priest on the Day of Atonement...

"A week beforehand, the high priest was put into seclusion - taken away from his home and into a place where he was completely alone. Why? So he wouldn't accidentally touch or eat anything unclean. Clean food was brought to him, and he'd wash his body and prepare his heart. The night before the Day of Atonement he didn't go to bed; he stayed up all night praying and reading God's Word to purify his soul.

⁴ [Dan Ariely, "Why We Lie," The Wall Street Journal \(5-26-12\)](#)

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Then on Yom Kippur he bathed head to toe and dressed in pure, unstained white linen. Then he went into the holy of Holies and offered an animal sacrifice to God to atone, or pay the penalty for, his own sins. After that he came out and bathed completely again, and new white linen was put on him, and he went in again, this time sacrificing for the sins of the priests. But that's not all. He would come out a third time, and he bathed again from head to toe and they dressed him in brand new pure linen, and he went into the holy of holies and atoned for the sins of all the people.

"Did you know that this was all done in public? The temple was crowded, and those in attendance watched closely. There was a thin screen, and he bathed behind it. But the people were present: They saw him bathe, dress, go in, come back out. He was their representative before God, and they were there cheering him on. They were very concerned to make sure that everything was done properly and with purity, because he represented them before God. When the high priest went before Gd there wasn't a speck on him; he was as pure as pure can be. Only if you understand that do you realize why the next lines of the prophecy in Zechariah 3 were so shocking: Zechariah saw Joshua the high priest standing before the presence of God in the holy of holies - but Joshua's garments were covered in excrement. He was absolutely defiled. Zechariah couldn't believe his eyes.

"Ray said the key interpretive question is: how could that have happened? There's no way the the Israelites would ever have allowed the high priest to appear before God like that. Ray's answer was this: God was giving Zechariah a prophetic vision so that he *could see us the way that God sees us*. In spite of all our efforts to be pure, to be good, to be moral, to cleanse ourselves, God sees our hearts, and our hearts are full of filth.

"All of our morality, all of our good works, don't really get to the heart, and Zechariah suddenly realized that no matter what we do we're unfit for the presence of God. But just as he was about to despair, he heard: "Take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to Joshua, 'See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you... Listen, ... I am going to bring my servant, the Branch, ...and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day'" (Zechariah 3:4 and 8-9). Zechariah probably couldn't believe his ears. He must have thought, "Wait a minute, for years we've been doing the sacrifices, obeying the cleanliness laws. We can never get the sin off ourselves!" But God was saying, "Zechariah, this is a prophecy. Someday the sacrifices will be over, the cleanliness laws will be fulfilled."

"How can that be? Ray Dillard closed the sermon like this: Centuries later another Joshua showed up, another Jeshua. Jesus, Yeshua, Joshua - its the same name in Aramaic, Greek, and Hebrew. Another Joshua showed up, and he staged his own Day of Atonement. One week beforehand, Jesus began to prepare. And the night before, he didn't go to sleep - but what happened to Jesus was exactly the reverse of what happened to Joshua the high priest, because instead of cheering him on, nearly everyone he

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loved betrayed, abandoned, or denied him. And when he stood before God, instead of receiving words of encouragement, the Father forsook him. Instead of being clothed in white garments, he was stripped of the only garment he had, he was beaten, and he was killed, naked. He was bathed too, Ray told us - in human spit.

"Why? "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). God clothed Jesus in our sin. He took our penalty, our punishment so that we, like Joshua, the high priest, can get what Revelation 19:7-8 pictures: "Let us rejoice and be glad...fine linen, bright and clean, is given to us *to wear*." ... Though Jesus Christ, at infinite cost to himself, God has clothed us in costly clean garments. It cost him his blood. And it is the only thing that can deal with the problem of your heart."⁵ "

** At some point in the spiritual journey of anyone who is truly seeking after God, the Holy Spirit is going to allow us to see the reality of what is going on inside of us. We will see that in spite of our best attempts to 'clean up', that, like this high priest, Joshua, we are still a *mess*. We are not capable of fixing what is broken inside of us. But by God's Grace, we will also see that what we could not do for ourselves, God did *for* us. And in the abandonment of our own efforts to make ourselves righteous and acceptable to God... we will find that exactly what we have been seeking all along is being offered to us in Christ. At the cost of his life...

Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift!

Amen.

⁵ King's Cross Timothy Keller, p. 75 - 77, ePub edition