

12<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Proper 16)  
August 23, a.D. 2009  
Mark 7: 1 – 13

The religious Jewish leaders feared and respected Jesus. It could be seen not in the way they listened to his teachings in repentance and faith, nor did they forsake everything to follow him, but in the way they selected the brightest and best their religion could produce to trap Jesus. Jerusalem's top scholars and legal experts, Pharisees and Scribes, were gathered into an impressive delegation of who's who, and were commissioned to dig up some dirt on Jesus.

That doesn't sound like holy work, does it? But they were fighting for their lives, their jobs, their self-respect and dignity. They were desperate. Their religion had degenerated into a well-oiled machine that could produce a sizable income. Jesus stood in the way of these profits. He dared to overturn the moneychangers' tables and drive out the sacrificial animals from his father's house of prayer. He began talking like he was God and turning the hearts of people away from their rules and traditions and to Himself.

The sheep-like wolves began to salivate when they noticed that his disciples broke the traditions of the elders by eating with unclean hands. The tradition of the Jewish elders demanded that if you go out in public and have any contact with anything foreign, unclean, or non-Jewish, you had to wash your hands to make yourself clean. This was a lot different than when mom tells you to wash before you eat. The Jewish washing was a ritual that made oneself clean before God and not doing it, was a sin.

Washing with water to make clean is the root meaning of baptism. Jewish baptizing of unclean hands, cups, huge wine jars and brass pans were strict rules handed down by their fathers. To disobey this ritual of Jewish baptism meant you were not fit for the kingdom of God. Jewish baptism introduced false worship and false teaching that you could make yourself clean before God by doing something.

When John the Baptist came along and was sent by God to baptize, his baptism was different than the Jewish one. John's baptism was preceded by repentance, which signaled the end of trying to make oneself fit for the Kingdom of God and followed by faith that God would grant the gift of purity and cleanness in the waters of baptism.

Jesus practiced what he preached. He was invited to a Pharisee's house and surprised his host by not washing before a meal. He also worked on the Sabbath by healing the sick, even extending his healing to foreigners. He talked to women in public and put the final nail in the coffin of the Jewish religion when he spoke about his physical body as a sacrifice supplanting the entire Jewish religious machine in the Temple.

The Lord Christ freed his disciples from the crusty tradition of Judaism. He uncovered the rottenness of the elders' tradition by pointing out its hypocrisy. There is hypocrisy whenever doctrine and practice no longer agree.

Jesus cleans up true religion again when he teaches: It is not unclean food or unwashed hands that separates one from God but man's unclean words, which embody the evil thoughts of his heart that encourages his rebellion against God. It is what comes from the inside of man that makes him unfit for worship of God and communion with the Holy One. What we cannot do for ourselves, God does. What God commands, He gives.

See this very great gift of God's washing promised already in Ezekiel 36: I will sprinkle clean water on you to cleanse you from all your uncleanness. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit in you and move you to follow my orders and carefully keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your fathers and be My people, and I will be your God.

With these blessed words, Jesus makes all food clean. He makes you pure and holy, and opens his church to people from all nations. His is religion that gives you the gifts of total forgiveness, perfect purity and righteousness. It is far different than the religion of the Pharisees and Scribes. That religion cannot be helped, ever. It can't be fixed. That's why Jesus separates himself from it.

You are free to stop trying to impress God and others, free to stop running from Him and to be at peace with God. God loves you too much to allow you to keep wearing a mask to hide your hypocrisy. He strips it away and now speaks his word of forgiveness and love. You are forgiven! Now Christ never leaves you naked or ashamed. Instead He makes the outward cultic purity of the Law fall aside like a worn out piece of clothing so that you are now clothed with Himself. God has joined you to His Son. What God has joined together, let no one, let no false teaching ever separate.