

September 1, 2024
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Mark 7:14–21

JESUS CLEANSSES THE HEART DISEASE OF SIN

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Your lab results came back and it's bad news. You are dying from *heart disease* and there's nothing you can do about it. You've probably been told that if you make changes in what you eat, get regular exercise, reduce your weight, and manage your stress, you can slow the effects or even reverse *heart disease*. Unfortunately, that's not true of *your* type of *heart disease*. Seeing a cardiologist and making lifestyle changes cannot help you. You can follow every holistic approach and take every pharmaceutical available – but none of it is going to save you.

Your diagnosis is original sin, which means you have a defiled and sinful heart. It's a genetic disease, inherited from your earliest ancestor, Adam. Your defiled heart is poisoning you from the inside out. It's more lethal than any other disease. Modern technology and mere men cannot detect it. They'll say you're healthy as a horse. Although you look great and feel great, and everything on the outside is sunshine and blue sky – that's only your outward appearance. Inside, you're dying of sin that's woven within the very fabric of your being. It's a terminal *disease of the heart*.

The Lord God doesn't see as a man sees. Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. (cf: 1 Samuel 16:7) Throughout the Bible, the heart is viewed as the “*seat of physical, spiritual and mental life*.” (BDAG, 508) It's the “*source and function of soul and spirit*.” (ANLEX, 215) Just as a saltwater spring flows with saltwater, and a thorn bush produces thorns, a defiled and sinful heart only generates evil and sin.

Our Gospel text this morning is a continuation of last week's text (Mark 7:1–13) where Jesus rebuked the Jewish scribes and Pharisees for honoring God with their lips while their hearts were far from Him. They were sticklers for strict *outward* observance of the law, most especially the observance of manmade religious traditions and ceremonies that were passed down from generation to generation and not part of God's divine Law given to Moses.

When the scribes and Pharisees saw some of Jesus' disciples eat with unwashed hands, they confront Jesus. His disciples aren't following the traditions of the elders. (Mark 7:1–5) But the religious leaders aren't concerned about germs and hygiene. They're concerned with outward ritual and ceremony to demonstrate religious purity. So Jesus rebukes them for being hypocrites. (cf: Mark 7:6–13) He's not saying that there's anything wrong with human traditions and

ceremonies – but it’s a problem when you elevate them over and against God’s Word and attach righteousness to them. **That’s** when traditions and ceremonies become sin.

The religious leaders lived and believed that what defiled a person is what goes into him. They believed that eating the wrong things the wrong way would transmit defilement and impurity inside to the whole person. Because, who knows? Maybe you inadvertently came into physical contact with an unclean person or unclean food prior to eating. So, they insisted that you eat the right foods in the right way – but not before you properly washed your hands – even though these were merely outward works invented by man instead of those commanded by God. This is the way they believed and lived. This is the way they taught their fellow Jews to believe and live, forsaking the commands of God and holding fast to the traditions of men. (cf: Mark 7:8)

In today’s Gospel, Jesus’ continues the conversation with the Jewish leaders and all the people. In His rich love and mercy, He corrects the religious leader’s false teaching, saying:

“Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” (Mark 7:14–15)

Upon entering a house and leaving the crowds outside, the disciples ask Jesus for an explanation on this new teaching. Jesus’ teaching goes against all that they had ever been taught – and His words make perfect sense. Whatever goes into a person cannot defile them because it never touches the heart. **Remember**, in the Bible, the heart is viewed as the “*seat of spiritual life.*” Defilement always involves the heart. But whatever goes into a person goes straight to the stomach, it’s digested, and then it’s... flushed down the drain so to speak, all without touching the heart. And having explained to His disciples that food cannot defile a man, Jesus now declares that all foods clean. (cf: Mark 7:19)

Then Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. He gets to the **heart disease** of the matter. It’s not what goes into you that defiles you but what comes out of you. You have a terminal heart disease called Original Sin – and Original Sin causes your actual sins. You’re not a sinner because you sin. No. You sin because you are a sinner. You and me and all mankind are natural enemies of God. (cf: Romans 8:7)

In this life many people will tell you to follow your heart. Others will tell you to give your heart to Jesus. But Jesus teaches us the correct understanding of the human heart and our sinful nature. Out of your heart and mine, come evil thoughts. “Evil thoughts” is a broad category, so beginning with sexual immorality, Jesus names twelve kinds of evil thoughts and actions that flow from a defiled and sinful heart. Twelve kinds of thoughts and actions that place you and me in danger of being excluded from the kingdom of heaven. (cf: 1 Corinthians 6:9–11)

“... sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:21–23)

The sinful heart likes to self-justify by comparing itself with others. We think that no matter how rotten of a scoundrel you and I may be, there’s always someone out there a little bit more rotten than us. It happens all the time. Your children compare their transgressions against their

siblings'. Prison inmates rank themselves according to their crimes. You and I silently pray: "*Oh Lord, I sure am glad that I'm not as bad as that sinner over there.*" (cf: Luke 18:11) We justify our politicians. We look for the candidate who doesn't lie and twist the truth as much as others. We'll vote for what we call "the lesser of the evils." But the truth is – the lesser of the evils is still evil.

Which of Jesus' list of evil thoughts and actions defile you? Can you find one or two? Perhaps it's every one of them. While you might think you look pretty good, and you self-justify that you're better than most, remember – it's only men who look at the outward appearance. God looks on the heart.

It was from before the foundation of the world that God looked on your sinful and diseased heart and saw that you are dying from the heart disease of Original Sin. It is He alone who has the power to create new and clean hearts in man through faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Good News Gospel of Christ crucified to save sinners.

Only one person has ever walked the face of the earth with a clean heart. That was the God/man Christ Jesus. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, His heart was pure and holy – and still is pure and holy. And from that pure and holy heart flowed love for both God and man, fulfilling God's Law for you and all mankind. Nailed to the cross to suffer God's wrath against sin, blood and water flowed from Jesus' pure and holy heart as He was pierced to save you from your defiled heart, and cleansing you by His atoning blood. (cf: John 19:34) Martin Luther writes in his Large Catechism:

"You and I would never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart." (LC II, 65–66)

Risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, all that Christ accomplished in His earthly life and death are poured out on you by faith alone by means of the Holy Spirit working through His Word and Sacrament. In the hearing of the Gospel, He washes you thoroughly from your iniquity and cleanses you from your sin, making you whiter than snow and creating in you a clean heart. (cf: Psalm 51:2, 7, 10) In the waters of Holy Baptism, He gave you:

"... the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on [you] richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace [you] might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." (Titus 3:5–7)

In Sacrament of the Altar, trusting in His words:

"Whoever feeds on [Jesus] flesh and drinks [His] blood has eternal life, and [He] will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:54)

Then, with your newly created heart, you are enabled to bear fruits of faith by the strength which God alone gives. Don't forget that your sinful heart wasn't removed in Baptism. So in spite of all your faithful and good intentions, those evil thoughts and actions will continually seek to defile your heart. (cf: Romans 7:18–19) By daily contrition and repentance, drown the old Adam along with all sins and evil desires, and arise a new creation in Christ. Whatever your sin may be,

whatever flows from your heart, Christ comes to you with forgiveness, healing, and love. The only deadly sin is the sin of unbelief.

Don't look to your heart to decide what good works are and which works you should do. Your defiled heart still deceives you with a defiled understanding and will. Instead, God has prepared beforehand what your good works are to be, wherever you are, at home, at work, or among your neighbors. (cf: Ephesians 2:10) Simply love and serve others just as God in Christ serves and loves you. Don't overthink it! Just do it!

While you might think you're healthy as a horse, and you self-justify that you're better than most others – only men look at the outward appearance. God looks on the heart. Thanks be to God that when He looks at the heart of the baptized believer, He sees a clean and pure heart, because of Christ Jesus' sacrifice on your behalf. Your debt has been paid. Your salvation is secure for the sake of Jesus. Don't follow your heart. Rely on God's grace in Christ, looking outside yourself to His holy Word and His work of salvation on the cross. That leaves you with a heart cleansed in the flood of Jesus' blood and righteousness.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.