

## **“A CLEAN HEART” MARK 7:14-23**

Let me suggest that any system of doctrine that makes God into a magician who banishes bad things is false. When you try to twist the Word of God into a mold that ignores the reality of evil, it cuts at the heart of biblical theology. The Bible takes evil seriously.

Did you hear about the ugly American who approached a third world Christian sitting serenely under a palm tree?

“What are you reading?” the American asked.

“The Bible.”

“In my country, the Bible is out of date.”

“If it were out of date, you would have been eaten by now.”

The Bible takes seriously our sin and the pain we suffer. When we try to make the Bible endorse a life of denial, the power of truth gets lost and we sound silly, and everybody knows it.

Silliness might make you feel better for the short haul, but reality has a way of breaking through and smacking us upside the head with a two by four.

The freest people in the world are Christians who know that the world is not a nice place where “God is in his heaven and all is right.” They know about the fall, about pain, about sin, and about danger. In the knowing of those things they find freedom. They can say, “I’m called to be here and even to suffer sometimes, but I’ll face that reality with God’s help and dance anyway.”

People like to say “Jesus is all I need.” But you won’t know Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have. When Jesus is all you have then, and only then, will you know that Jesus is all you need.

Jesus was trying to tell the Pharisees of that day, his disciples, and the crowd and ultimately you and me...that Jesus is finally all we have, and that we need him.

If last week’s Gospel reading dealt with things external (defiled unclean hands), this week’s deals with things internal (an unclean heart); part two of Jesus’ teaching on what makes things and people clean and unclean.

The audience has changed. “Then he called the crowd again and said to them...” The stern critique he gave to the religious leaders is now distilled into a simple saying: “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile (make one unclean), but the things that come out are what defile.” (Make one unclean) Cut off from God.

The disciples are left in confusion. When they question him about the whole affair, Jesus has “left the crowd and entered the house”

Jesus then gives a basic lesson on gastroenterology: What goes into a person bypasses the heart, into the stomach, flushed out of the intestines, into the sewer. But then the lesson becomes this, what defiles (separates us from God, makes us unclean, is a matter of the heart, and only the heart is a completely internal organ. “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” The long list then follows: “for out of the heart of man, comes evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” This holds a mirror up to us all, since it is hard to read it and not feel implicated somewhere along the line. There’s enough evil to go around for every human heart and then some.

It’s crazy isn’t it. Jesus suggesting that it’s not what we do on the outside that makes us unclean, but it’s what comes from the heart that makes us unclean. And we need help to have a clean heart.

It’s looking to Christ, wrestling with the truth of the soul rather than a dog and pony show in the center ring of a circus.

After all, if we go through religious motions to get people to think of us as religious, praise us, and all that, we are receiving our false redemption from a bunch of people who are going to be dead in 50 years. This is a shabby replacement for an eternal God. It’s a trick of Satan to get us to perform religious actions without meaning them.

At the time of Martin Luther, the church was building sanctuaries by selling bricks to people in exchange for indulgences. If a person bought a brick, they would be forgiven a few more sins or help a loved one out of purgatory. Because people couldn’t read and there weren’t many copies of the Bible floating around anyway, religious leaders used the threat of hell and God’s wrath to manipulate the masses. But when Luther read a copy of the Bible for himself, he began a reformation against this kind of B.S. It makes you wonder how amazed he was when Luther first read the words of Christ in the book of Matthew. Instead of giving God’s Word as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, Jesus begins talking about the Pharisees.

They package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like a pack animal. They seem to take pleasure in watching you stagger under these loads, and wouldn’t think of lifting a finger to help. Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next. They love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, preening in the radiance of public flattery. Don’t let people do that to you; put you on a pedestal like that. You all have a single teacher, and you are all classmates. Don’t set people up as experts over your life, letting them tell you what to do. Save that authority for God, let him tell you what to do. There is only one Life Leader for you and them – Christ. (Matt. 23:4-10)

I know it's tempting to believe that if we will walk through 10 steps or listen to only a certain kind of music or pray in a certain way and for a certain number of days then we will find favor with God, but we won't. If we trust in steps, we are not trusting in God. Nothing else can cleanse our hearts. Only God in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He is the authority we need. Only he can make us clean in our greatest need of a clean heart

Eugene Peterson in his popular paraphrase *The Message* utilizes some keen language to sum up this list: "All these are vomit from your heart. There is the source of your pollution." "Pollution." We tend to think of pollution as something out there, that we breathe in. But, in matters of the heart, pollution is something produced by the internal combustion of evil; our sin, mine and yours, pollutes the world.

And in this sense we have a truly "green" Savior. His way of dealing with the pollution of sin and evil is not to cap its emissions, but to cut it off at the source. To paraphrase the psalmist, Jesus is in the business of creating clean hearts. Which ultimately is a call to repentance: I need his help...Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.(Joel 2:13) That cleansing work is completed by the work of the cross, the ultimate purging of the world's pollution.

But Jesus' whole life and ministry, every single day of it, was taken up in binding up dirty and broken hearts.

The same goes for every day of his resurrected life. Every time sins are forgiven, a dirty heart is created clean. And a beautiful thing this is. A clean heart pumps out clean energy. In Galatians 5, Paul contrasts with what comes from a clean heart: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the spirit". (Galatians 5:22-25)

As Jesus tells us what makes us clean and what is unclean we see God whispering to us that I no longer have to perform in a circus, that I no longer have to defend myself in a sinking ship, that God had come to earth, made himself human, taken the world's sin upon himself, and was crucified for you and me, so that his glory would shine through us, so that we could be whole, with a clean heart.

As we come again to the Lord's Table to feed on Christ hear these words. Here is to Christ for making us, to Christ for rescuing us,  
To Christ for creating in us clean hearts to serve him, and who gives us hope for tomorrow.

A clean heart led by the Spirit...I can't think of a better energy policy for the people of God in this "green" season of Pentecost.

If God can create in us new hearts, we look forward to a new heaven and earth, and when we get there we will say, I've come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here!

This is the land I've been looking for all my life, though I never knew it. In fact, as C.S. Lewis put it, all the adventures that we have ever had will end up being only the cover and the title page. Finally we will begin Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has ever read which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.

Joy in the Christ Life, David E. Hinck, Pastor FGS