



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 14

August 25, 2024

Seal of the Scriptures

Mark 7:1–13

¹When the Pharisees gathered to [Jesus], with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ²they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) ⁵And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*”

⁸*You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”*

⁹And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban’ (that is, given to God)— ¹²then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

After focusing our attention for the last several weeks on the Bread of Life discourse from John 6, we now turn to the Gospel of St. Mark, as the church ponders the ongoing conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus. Lying behind the confrontation in today’s pericope is the Jewish ceremonial hand-washing, which went far beyond a simple practice of hygiene, having taken on religious and moral significance during the time of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. And they were serious about such washing. One Talmudic sage went so far as to say that failing to wash was tantamount to committing adultery with a prostitute. And, though Jesus predated this particular resource (Babylonian Talmud) by some 400 years, the attitude it expresses was no doubt already in place at the time of Christ.

So, it had been observed – because the Pharisees were constantly observing Jesus and His disciples – that the disciples failed to uphold the practice of ceremonial washing before they ate. This failure elicited a strong rebuke by the Jewish teachers of the Law. And Jesus responded by quoting the Old Testament, particularly the prophet Isaiah. You



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see, the law the Pharisees were insisting should be upheld, was not a scriptural law; it was a pharisaical law, that is to say, a man-made law. Jesus insisted on bringing the scriptures to bear on the subject, maintaining, rightfully so, that the Word of God trumps any law made by man. That principle lies at the heart of this and many other issues, and will be the focus of our consideration today.

The prophet Isaiah spoke words that would not have been well accepted in our culture today. They weren't very well accepted in his day, either, by the way. He highlights a dimension of sin that can take control of a person's mind and heart, saying that the eyes of the prophets and teachers had been closed. They had entered a spirit of deep sleep. So, even the prophets and teachers of the law in Isaiah's day were unable to understand the Holy Scriptures.

Isaiah tells us in today's Old Testament that, when these prophets and teachers tried to read the scriptures, they could not, because the scriptures had been sealed. They could read the words, but they couldn't understand what the words meant. They didn't "get" what God was trying to say, because they had become more interested in their own customs and less interested in what God was trying to teach. They sold out the Holy Spirit in favor of their own principles.

It's hard to know for sure what was really influencing the Pharisees. Were they so blinded by what they were used to that they couldn't really see that the Old Testament speaks and prophecies of Jesus Christ? Some have suggested that what they were really interested in was job security, and that is why they clung so tightly to their own rules and practices. I'm sure that was part of it. And when this man Jesus came along with some raggedy fishermen, and they didn't tow the line, Jesus and His disciples were considered by them to be a threat.

What's more: Jesus taught with power. This, too, threatened their "job security." So, how fitting was it that Jesus quoted from Isaiah 29, because there the prophet was foretelling that the teachers of the Law would be replaced by characters they wouldn't expect. He says, "And the Lord said: because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do marvelous things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden."

Isaiah is saying that, in the future, the so-called wise men will be utterly ignorant; there will be a seal on their interpretation of Scripture. But, this book will be opened by the most unexpected people. Isaiah says, "In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel." This is prophecy of the days of Jesus. Those who didn't understand will come to understand.



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Lowly fishermen will preach God's Word with power.

The Pharisees and the Scribes must have looked at the disciples with disdain. These men were nothing much to look at. It just so happened that the hearts of the disciples were open to learning and seeking God. They were willing to be surprised by what was taught to them. The Pharisees were not willing to learn, unwilling to be surprised or to accept what they heard.

In our own journey with Christ, we must always be ready to be surprised, to learn something new from the pages of Scripture, that the Lord will keep them open to us and that we may understand them. Otherwise, we run the risk of becoming complacent. Our spiritual growth may be halted and we'll want to hold on for dear life to things just because they're familiar to us.

Another thing to keep in mind is that, in order to further His kingdom, Jesus uses people that we wouldn't expect. Jesus tends to use the meek and the humble, for instance. And the reason He does this is so that His heavenly Father's name will be glorified, not the person He's using. If He had chosen great, worldly, savvy men for the apostolic ministry, people would attribute the wonders and signs done by them to those men. But, if He used tax collectors and fishermen . . . then people would sit up, take notice, and marvel at the mighty works of God.

This is why Isaiah prophesied that in the future, "The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel." This is fulfilled in the disciples who happened to be sitting there with unwashed hands.

Applying this to ourselves, then, we must be careful that we don't turn Christian freedom into a law of our own making, and that, when we say "thus says the Lord," that the Lord has thus truly said. Is washing your hands before you eat a good idea? Yes, I think it is. Was it commanded by God? No, it wasn't. In fact, the pharisees were obscuring laws that God had given while at the same time making up laws God had never given. Well meaning Christians can be just as guilty of this.

We must repent, beloved, and not put words in God's mouth, to make Him say things He never said. Let us speak His words to one another truly and focus our attention on what He has actually said, not merely what we wish He had said. Let us seek the *Lord's* will for His church, not *our* will. And what is the Lord's will for His church? Christ desires to bestow great blessings on His people through the Word and Sacraments. He wants us to pay attention to the work He began on the cross and continues to do among us through His Means of Grace. Your sins have been washed away, beloved; you have been redeemed from the condemnation of the Law. You have been set free by the Spirit of God and you now walk as His holy children. Receive His free gift of grace and don't try to save yourselves by making up new laws for yourself and others.

Christ is your Savior, His gospel is the Means by which He saves. Even His own law



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doesn't save. What good do you think man-made laws will accomplish? Let the Lord do His work in His church. Let the goodness of God be made known to you and the seal of the Scriptures be opened to you through the teaching of Christ and His apostles. His love is in your midst, His truth envelopes you with the proclamation of everlasting life, and His holiness is delivered to you by grace through faith. This is the truth to which we must hold now and always. God make it so in the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen