



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

**Sermon for Pentecost 15**

September 1, 2024

# Only God Will Make Us Clean

## Mark 7:14-23

<sup>14</sup>[Jesus] called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>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." <sup>16</sup>If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. <sup>17</sup>And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. <sup>18</sup>And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, <sup>19</sup>since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) <sup>20</sup>And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. <sup>21</sup>For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup>coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Peter must have forgotten the Lord's words in today's Gospel. You may recall the scene in Acts 10 in which the Lord granted Peter a vision, showing him on a sheet let down from heaven a collection of foods traditionally considered by the Jews to be unclean, and commanding him to "kill and eat." "But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' And the voice came to him again a second time, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.'" (Acts 10:13-15).

In today's pericope, the Lord said to the multitude gathered around Him, "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" (v. 15). In explaining the parable to His disciples, He said, "Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.)" (vv. 18b-19). By a word the Lord declared all foods clean. There's no need for us, then, to set limits where the Lord has removed them.

Here our Lord employs an Hebraic style of argumentation (*minore ad maius*) that begins with the lesser and ends with the greater. What's important, He says, isn't what goes into us, but what comes out of us. And He uses the analogy of the digestive process to speak about the heart. What makes a person clean or unclean is what's born in his heart. Jesus says, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come 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" (vv. 20-23). What ought we to think,



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then, when someone suggests that we “follow our heart”? What comes from the heart are the fruits of sinful man – your fruit, my fruit. These sinful fruits we bear, you and I, for we too are poor miserable sinners, who have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved God with our whole heart, and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. When we thus examine ourselves according to the Ten Commandments, we immediately see that we have sinned – all of us – and fallen short of the glory of God. Whether we think sinful thoughts, or say sinful things, do sinful things, we’re sinful. We’re unclean, and we cannot of ourselves generate anything good that can come from us.

From the Psalm that is the basis for today’s Introit, the psalmist, King David, confesses, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5), a confession that we must all make, as we all must confess our sins and our sinfulness before God the Father Almighty. To confess our sinful behavior is not enough, for it’s not just our thoughts, words, and deeds that are sinful; our very *hearts* are sinful; our *hearts* are not right with God; they’re unclean.

In this same Psalm, David prays, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise" (Ps. 51:15). We can’t speak as we ought until the Lord opens our lips. *Then*, we can say to Him what we need to say, as the tax collector who "would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’" (Lk. 18:13). The Holy Spirit moved David to compose a number of penitential psalms – songs of repentance – like the one used for our Introit.

David wrote Psalm 51 after committing both adultery and murder. Grieved over his sins and moved by the Holy Spirit, he prayed that God would make him clean. His words in this psalm are used today in both the Introit and the Offertory: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free Spirit" (Ps. 51:7, 10-12).

You see, David knew that he couldn’t become clean from within. You can’t get clean bathing in dirty water. David’s heart was unclean and he knew he could only be made clean from the outside. So he called on the Lord, who alone could make him clean. The Lord, who by a word made many clean of their diseases, also by a word made David clean, speaking through the prophet Nathan, "The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Sam. 12:13b). Jesus said to His disciples on Maundy Thursday, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you" (Jn. 15:3).

The Lord has cleansed *you* by a word already this morning, beloved, speaking through me, His called and ordained servant, as I act in His stead and by His command. Through me, our Lord Jesus Christ has forgiven you all your sins in the Name of the Father and of



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the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. He made you clean a long time ago, in a land far away, on the tree of the cross, where He by a word made us clean: *Tetelestai* . . . "It is finished!" By this one Greek word our Lord made us clean, for He who was clean before His baptism in the Jordan became dirty through that sacramental act, submitting Himself to baptism, taking our sins upon Himself, becoming unclean for our sake, and giving His body and shedding His blood on the cross, "and the blood of Jesus Christ [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7b). By His death and resurrection, our Lord has blessed us to bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:22-24). Those who believe and are baptized have received the gifts of forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit by grace through faith.

"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:4-11).

Yes, fellow redeemed, consider yourselves to be no longer unclean but made clean by the blood of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, and mark well what this means for your life, that you "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1), and that *your* body of sin might be brought to nothing, "for God did not call us for uncleanness, but in holiness" (1 Th. 4:7). Since, however, we remain in sinful flesh, and cannot attain to this lofty goal with anything approaching perfection, our Savior bids us come to His Table, that He would give us His own body and blood to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of our sins and for the continual cleansing of our hearts, for He makes us clean through His Word and Sacraments. He washes us in the blood of His cross and we are declared *forgiven* by the Father for the sake of His Son. Thanks be to God!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen