

# The Danger of Clean Hands & A Pagan Heart

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Preacher: Pastor Cal Morrison

[ 0 : 00 ] Lord our God, we thank you so much for your word.

Speak faithfully and truthfully about You, about Your Word, about Your truth, about Your Son.

Lord, would You speak to our hearts and open our hearts this morning for our good and for Your glory. Amen. Mark chapter 7, I'm going to read from verse 1 to 23.

Now, when the Pharisees gathered to Him, that is Jesus, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of His disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash.

[ 1 : 27 ] And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches. And 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? And 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. In vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. And He said to them, You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition. For Moses said, Honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die. But you say, If a man tells his father or mother,

Whatever you would have gained from Me is korban that is given to God, then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the Word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do. And He called the people to Him again and said to them, Hear Me, all of you, and understand, 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. And when He had entered the house and left the house and left the people, His disciples asked Him about the parable, 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, since it enters not his heart, but his stomach, and is expelled? Thus He declared, all foods clean. And He said, 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. Amen. This is the Word of God, and may He bless the reading to us.

Well, I wonder this morning, when you woke up, when you had breakfast, when you got ready, when you made your way to this gathering this morning, were any of you particularly concerned about the risk of becoming defiled this morning?

The most frequent word in our passage is this business about being defiled, and it's closely followed by the word tradition. Now, looking back from our vantage point, it would be easy to look down on these Pharisees. But let me tell you a truth. Humans have not changed in the past 2,000 years.

In our passage, the disciples are not following a tradition of the elders, but churches have built their own traditions and get equally legalistic about them. Yet I wonder when we last heard about becoming defiled, or when was the last time that you were remotely concerned about becoming defiled?

[ 5 : 20 ] Every day, we don't need to look far to sense the dangers in our world. Turn on the news, or read a newspaper, and you will see all sorts of present dangers. You'd hardly want to leave your house without worrying about some madman with a knife, or some pandemic, or the next storm in the alphabet, or a meteor, or alien ship that's heading towards earth. Endless dangers on our doorsteps.

But one thing that you never hear about in the news is the danger about becoming defiled in your own heart. Now, it's not wrong to be concerned about all the dangers out there. There are many of them.

If we love life, and if we love our family and friends, we will want to protect them. But are we as concerned about the soul as we are about the body? And do we guard our hearts as carefully as we guard our homes? So the first thing I want to highlight in this passage is that when Jesus rebukes the Pharisees here, he doesn't actually rebuke the idea that a person can become defiled. Two great dangers we said earlier on that have always been present in Christianity are legalism and liberalism.

Legalism is like what the Pharisees are doing. Legalism is insisting on a very strict standard of rules and traditions of man, and those who insist on these things end up becoming hypocrites.

In this extreme, people either mischaracterize God's commands as though they are heavy and tiresome burdens, or they reject God's commands to establish their own traditions. And this has always been a problem in Christianity, and we still see it all the time in churches today. Similarly, liberalism is the opposite extreme, emphasizing a freedom from all rules such that you can do whatever you want, and you can live however you please before God. In this extreme, people disregard God's concern for how humans live, and they presume on God's grace. We also see this all of the time in churches today. Both of the extremes have always been a problem in Christianity because they have always been a problem in the world, because these extremes are a human problem. However, it's worth noticing that in our passage, Jesus doesn't say to the Pharisees, oh, don't be ridiculous, people can't become defiled. Jesus didn't say that. He corrects their understanding about how a person can become defiled. Yet, how often do we hear that or think about that? We don't hear about that in the news. We don't hear about the danger of becoming defiled in our hearts when we open a newspaper or put on the news channel or go outside.

[ 8 : 35 ] When was the last time you thought about what could defile you? This is the very thing the Pharisees were concerned about is becoming defiled. They thought about it every single time they went to eat. Every time they came from the marketplace, they had special washing methods that could be the envy of any surgeon. Not just for their hands, but in our passage it says they had special washing ceremonies for their cups, their pots, and even their dining couches.

When was the last time you washed your dining couch? Last week we saw this beautiful picture of what happens to folks who touched Jesus. Yet in this passage we see a tradition where people are very worried about what they touched. If you touched the wrong kind of meat or the wrong kind of person at the marketplace, you were in real danger. Do you remember the COVID slogans back in 2020?

Stay home, protect the NHS, save lives. Or even quirkier, hands, face, space. Remember that?

The government's telling us to wash our hands to the tune of happy birthday twice over. Wash your hands for 20 seconds or more. Now don't get me wrong. I'm a big fan of washing hands.

When it comes to viruses and germs, no thanks. I'm a fan of washing hands. But think about these slogans during COVID and how similar they would have been to the Pharisees in Jesus' day 2,000 years ago when the Jews come back from the marketplace. Hey, hands, face, space. It's not the same thing as the Pharisees. Their rules about hand washing is not about hygiene. It's about holiness. You see, the disciples, they don't have bad hygiene. It's not about eating with dirty hands. They just didn't keep the tradition of meticulous ceremonial washing. And so, in some ways, the Pharisees wanted Israel to be holy compared with all the pagan nations. And there was pride in that. In the past, Israel and their history had acted just like the pagans, and they were exiled. So now, now they had built many meticulous rules over and above God's law because they wanted there to be as many fences as possible to keep the bad stuff out. Yet they made the mistake of thinking that the danger was on the outside. They were too busy guarding their hands that they forgot to guard their hearts. When they see the disciples of Jesus not keeping the tradition, they challenged Jesus. Now, one thing to keep in mind here is that the leaders, the Pharisees, they're not really bothered about a few fishermen and tax collectors. They're trying to get at Jesus. They are trying to discredit Jesus. They don't really care about the disciples. They're trying to discredit Jesus. That's who they're really after. That's who the world and the enemy has always been after God. And every attack of humans, it's always been an attack on God. And so, their question about the disciples is really meant to undermine Jesus as their teacher, as a credible rabbi. Hey, Jesus, why do your students not even keep the basic traditions of the elders? Have you not taught them properly? Look, they're eating with defiled hands. What are you teaching them? See, they're trying to discredit Jesus. Yet, it completely backfires.

[ 12 : 50 ] Jesus replied, well, how well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites? Well, not very meek and mild as Jesus here. Isaiah even had these Pharisees pegged. So, Jesus quotes Isaiah 29 and says, As it is written, this people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men. They're paying lip service to God. Their reverence is in vain. For all their meticulous rituals and traditions, they think, get this, these Pharisees, experts in the law. They think that God can be so easily filled by clean hands that he won't see their hard hearts. It's crazy, isn't it? But here's the scary thing.

It is possible to have clean hands and still have a pagan heart. Lips that honor God and a heart that's far from him. You can look religious on the outside and still be a pagan on the inside.

And that was the same back in Isaiah's day. Isaiah 1, the very first chapter of Isaiah says, I have had enough of your sacrifices. When you come before me, who has required of you this trampling of my course? Bring no more vain offerings, incenses, and abomination to me. Your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I'm weary of bearing them. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct oppression. God was fed up of their religiosity. And two examples that Jesus uses in our passage is, firstly, that the Pharisees are only outwardly religious, but their heart is far from God. And secondly, their traditions have actually led to injustice and oppression. So again, firstly, their hearts, their hearts don't even belong to God. For all that they claim they serve God, their hearts don't actually belong to God. They don't do all of these religious things out of a love for God. They think they're right before God because they've got clean hands. But secondly, their traditions are not helping people to become more godly. Jesus uses one of their other traditions to show that. This whole thing about Corban, it was a way to declare something as dedicated to the Lord. And so the Pharisees were so legalistic in their own tradition that if a person declared their property or possession to be Corban, if somebody declared, my stuff is dedicated to the

Lord, then the Pharisees would forbid them from using them for things like providing for their family. Because the Pharisees were so strict about vows that even if it meant they couldn't fulfill the law to honor your father and mother, the Pharisees were like, hey, you made a vow. That's dedicated to the Lord now. You can't use it for your mom and dad. And so the legalism of the Pharisees to man-made tradition actually nullified the commandment of God to honor your father and mother. Their tradition superseded God's commandment. And it made God look like he cared more about things than he cares about people. You see, your mom and dad look after you when you're little, and when they get very old, you're supposed to look after them. And for the Jews, that would be helping them with property and possessions. And yet they found a loophole in this tradition of vows and Corban and stuff where they would say, hey, well, this is dedicated to the Lord. I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry, Mom. I can't give you this because I'm being so religious and godly to dedicate this to God. Yet they would just keep it for themselves. And so it was an injustice against their elderly parents. God's concerned about injustice and oppression. God's concerned about the vulnerable people. God doesn't care more about things than he does people. And that was the terrible thing about this was it mischaracterized God. God doesn't need other things. Yet man-made traditions often make it look like God cares more about things than people.

Legalism to tradition makes no room for the grace of God. It's like an old wineskin that can't stretch or flex. And if we truly understood the heart of God's commands, we would see God's heart in his commands that he deeply cares for people. And so hopefully we can see the danger of tradition in the hands of legalistic people. Jesus exposes the heart that's behind it, and that is a hard and hypocritical heart that doesn't know God's grace. This is helpful for the disciples to hear this. This rebuke is helpful for Jesus' disciples, because further down the line, when the gospel is going out, especially to Gentiles, the disciples will have to consider their traditions and how to make room for God's grace.

[ 18 : 39 ] And we see this, don't we? We see this in the book of Acts, how the disciples had to make room in their traditions and in their ways for the grace of God. We see this with Peter in Acts.

And then when we think of Mark's first readers, the people who first received the gospel of Mark, Mark was mentored by Peter, and his gospel is basically Peter's testimony. And he is writing likely to Christians in Rome, mostly Gentile, who are under pressure. And it's good for those first readers to read this, because they see that while the strict unbelieving Jews would look down on them, Jesus would welcome them. They don't need to live up to some man-made tradition.

They don't need to live up to the burdens of Judaism. Jesus would welcome them. They don't need to take a certain form of strict religion.

They don't need to even worry about what they are eating, as if it would defile them. It's not going to defile them. Jesus showed that food doesn't go near the heart on its journey through the body.

Now, he's not talking about bad cholesterol or anything like that. But food, in its journey through the body, doesn't go near the heart. It doesn't go near your thoughts and intentions and desires.

[ 20 : 05 ] It just goes through the body. So they're not defiled, just because they don't do these purity rules.

Now, what about us? So the disciples, it was good for them to hear that, to consider when the gospel goes out. And Mark's readers, it was good for them to hear that, when people are looking down on them, putting pressure on them to take a certain form of religion. But what about us? Have you ever felt like you are weak as a Christian? Have you ever felt that perhaps you're not living up to it, that you're failing as a Christian? Have you ever felt like you could be a little more devoted than you currently are? Have you ever felt like you are perhaps not as spiritual as someone else? You ever felt like that? I've felt like that loads of times, let me tell you.

It's normal. It's a very normal thing. I remember being at an airport with Jen. We were going through security, and I saw these Orthodox Jews with the hats and the curly sideburns, and they just looked devoted. I just looked at them and thought, wow, they are devoted. And I remember thinking to myself, well, I think I could be a little more devoted than I currently am. And I thought to myself, I imagine that they're probably more strict every single day than I am.

what on earth is it? And think about this. Their God is the true God. It's not some foreign God.

The one that they're trying to do that for is the true God, the God of Israel. And so I thought to myself, what makes me, a struggling Gentile, more right with God than these strict devoted Jews? Well, the first thought was, it's certainly not because I'm better than them, because I'm not better than them. But it is simply that I believe in the Son of God, the one who God sent. And God will not receive praise from those who reject His Son.

[ 22 : 22 ] He will not. The answer is simple. John 14, 6 says, Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me. That's the difference. That's the only difference, is Jesus. If you accept God, you will accept the one He sent. And if you don't accept the one He sent, then you don't accept God. If you don't love the Son, then you don't love God. If you don't worship the Son, then you don't worship God. That's the difference. And so we mustn't think that our strict adherence to traditions or rules can make us right before God. And we will likely scoff at other people's traditions while we are blind to our own. We mustn't think that any one of us is more holy because we do this or that thing. And we shouldn't think that someone else is more holy and spiritual because they do this or that thing. I am aware, as I stand here today, I am aware that a person can preach a faithful sermon from the pulpit and their hearts still be far from God. I'm aware of that.

A person can serve faithfully every week for years in some ministry and yet do so begrudgingly in their heart. A person can look very interested in the things of God and all their activity and yet hold resentment and condemnation in their heart for others who don't do the same. The point is, we can look godly in a thousand different ways on the outside, yet true godliness starts and ends with the heart, not with the hands. And Jesus exposes this with the Pharisees. It's as if he says to the Pharisees, oh, you think you've avoided being defiled because of all these things that you do, yet you did not realize that your own heart has already defiled you. On the outside, these Jews, they look different from the pagans, but their hearts were not so different. On the outside, we can look different from all the unbelievers out there, but it's possible to have clean hands and a pagan heart.

Jesus says, what comes out of a person is what defiles him from within. Out of the heart of man comes evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness, all of these things that come from within, and they defile a person.

And so two things. Firstly, are any of us completely guilt-free? When you look at that list, when you consider that it is from within your heart that defiles you, are any of us completely guilt-free?

You see, if the disciples were glad to see Jesus rebuking the Pharisees and hearing that they don't need to wash their hands to avoid being defiled, when Jesus said all of these things, I think the disciples would have felt a sense of hopelessness. Goodness, well, who is not defiled? Who is not defiled? Surely we are all defiled. And secondly, do we feel a sense of being defiled because of our sinful thoughts? Do we realize what our own thoughts do to us? It may have never crossed your mind this morning that you were in danger of being defiled, but we can so easily guard our homes and clean our hands, yet forget to guard our hearts from the very real danger that we face every single day.

[ 26 : 21 ] Think about that list of things that Jesus said can defile us. And on that list, he didn't say food. He didn't even say food. And the Pharisees are all concerned about food. You see, Jeremiah 17 says, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand it?

Consider the world that we live in today, a world completely oblivious to the dangers of a sick heart. We see in our world today a greater concern about the food that we eat than what our sexual practices are, or murdering unborn children and assisting suicide. Our world is more concerned about the food we eat than these things. Not only do these things cause tremendous harm, but our culture is completely defiled. It seems the world is happy to descend into degradation while shaming people about food.

That not true? People are protesting about all the ways the environment is polluted, yet nobody seems to notice all the ways our own heart is polluting us. It's a dangerous culture to live in if you want to have a clean heart. No wonder James said that religion is pure and undefiled is keeping oneself unstained from the world. Psalm 24 says, Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart. The Pharisees had clean hands, but they didn't have a pure heart. You see, it's not enough to wash your hands. You need a clean heart. Jeremiah 4 says, Wash your heart from evil that you may be saved.

Do you remember David, King David, what he did? Remember the great sin of his life? Then he wrote Psalm 51 after he was caught, Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy.

Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. 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. We don't need traditions to keep our hands clean.

[ 28 : 55 ] We need hyssop with the blood of Christ to make our hearts clean. 1 John 1.7 says, The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. We shouldn't just feel guilty and sorry for our sin.

We should feel unclean for it. We should feel how our sinful thoughts defile us. Let me tell you a little story. When I first became a Christian, I was at home with my dad, and the phone rang back in the days when you had a landline. Some of you still have one of those old technology landlines. And my dad casually said, completely normal thing for anyone in central Scotland in our culture to say. He said, if that's for me, just say I'm in a bath.

Something silly like that, right? But I had just become a Christian, and I remember being so conflicted when he said that, thinking to myself, I cannot lie. I cannot lie. Now, do you know, it never occurred to me that I could also just not answer the phone. Anyway, I picked up the phone, and of course it was from my dad. I'm not that popular. It was from my dad. And I said something about, he's in a bath or something like that. I lied. And then I ran upstairs, and I cried. True story.

Just months prior, I had no problem about lying. I had no problem about swearing. I had no problem about doing all manner of things. But for some reason, this little lie broke my heart.

I felt like I was defiled. I felt like I'd spoiled this new heart that God had given me. Did you know, hands up if you know John Bunyan. You know John Bunyan, Pilgrim of Progress?

[ 30 : 52 ] One of the greatest works in Christianity. Did you know that before John Bunyan was converted, he was most known for how creatively he could swear?

Did you know that John Bunyan? Or did you know that St. Augustine, before his conversion, was known for his hedonistic worldly living?

What were you known for before you came to Christ? In Mark chapter 14, did you know that Peter, of course you know this, that Peter denied Christ three times, and then he broke down and wept? We need to give our hearts to God, and we need to guard our hearts for God. Proverbs 4, 23 says, above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Now, I've had things happen to me on the outside that were strange, little attacks.

No doubt you've had your own version of this, where things in the world strangely come against you. But one thing that I've noticed, when I'm smart enough to catch it, is the real battle takes place in the mind. After these things, you're in this battle.

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10, But let me tell you, trying to do that every single day is really hard.

[ 32 : 49 ] really hard to take every thought captive, but that's where the battle is. We need to be aware of how easily our hearts and thoughts could defile us.

For all the dangers we see on the news, the worst thing is not even mentioned. And locked doors will not help us. But thank God.

Thank God that there is good news. That the blood of Christ can cleanse us. 1 John 2 says, My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.

But if you do sin, if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous. Thank God. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

You see, the disciples would later learn what it would take for our hearts to be made clean. And Mark's readers would see all of the struggles of the disciples to understand yet how willing Jesus still was to go to the cross.

[ 33 : 59 ] Jesus tells us where the danger lies. Not so much out there. If you want to follow the Pharisees, then you can play games at washing your hands and pretending like you're godly.

But if you want to follow Jesus, it has to be about the heart. And then your actions will follow. We need to be reminded often that more than anything that we can offer God, He wants our heart.

He wants our heart, and only He can make it clean. And how good it is that Jesus would do that. And so you don't need to fear, because if anyone is in Christ, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

Create in me a clean heart, O God. How good is Jesus? How gracious and kind. What a Savior. Let us love the Lord with all our heart and mind and soul and strength.

Let me pray. Lord, we thank You for Your words here that give us the truth about our hearts and about the world and about the real danger of us being defiled.

[ 35 : 14 ] This puts the entire human race in. A serious predicament. Who is not defiled? But yet, Lord, You have come for the very purpose to give us a new heart.

A heart that does love You. A heart that does seek after You. A heart that is clean. And so, Lord, we thank You so much for the hope.

In the world we hear loads of bad news, but we don't even hear the worst news. Yet, in You, we hear the greatest news there is. That in Jesus Christ, in Your blood, You can cleanse us of all our sin and wash as white as snow.

And so, let us constantly look to You and let us not worry so much about what we do with our hands before we think about what we do with our hearts. Lord, may we offer our hearts to You right now, in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.