

The First Sunday of Advent

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together. Lord, if you do not speak, I speak in vain. And if you do not open our hearts, we listen in vain.

So would you come and would you help us to hear what you want to say to your church today? In your name, amen. Amen. You may be seated. Dan was right.

But this is the first Sunday of Advent. It's the beginning of that four-week season of the year where we look forward to Christmas. And we're going to begin this season in Mark chapter 7.

And Jesus is going to teach us that the human heart is a fountain of evil. Yes, you heard me correctly. This is the first Sunday of Advent.

It's the beginning of that season where we prepare for the celebration and the festivity that comes at Christmas. And we're going to begin in Mark chapter 7.

[1 : 04] Jesus is going to tell us that we have a serious heart sickness. This is the first Sunday of Advent. It's the beginning of that season where we remember being filled with emotions of joy and hope and longing.

And we're going to begin in Mark chapter 7 with Jesus telling us what our greatest problem is.

Jesus is going to reveal to us the fundamental problem that underlies all our other problems.

And he's going to tell us what is the source of so much of the evil and devastation that still runs wild in our world. He's going to tell us about our own hearts. Jesus is going to tell us that the human heart is a fountain of evil.

How? How? I mean, how in the world does Jesus get there? Well, interestingly enough, it all begins with a deep-seated concern for holiness.

Our passage starts with a huge concern for holiness. And then we end up with Jesus telling us that our hearts are a fountain of evil. Let's see how we get there. Let's start with verses 1 through 5.

[2 : 15] Now, why would they be outraged about the disciples not washing their hands before they eat?

It's not a concern about personal hygiene. They are not germaphobic like I'm sure many of you out there are. They were concerned with holiness.

The disciples did not wash their hands, which means they broke the tradition of the elders, which means they were not concerned with holiness. Now, some of you may be thinking to me right now, and Jordan, that's great and all, but what does washing hands and tradition of the elders have to do with holiness?

Those seem like quite separate categories. They're actually not for the Jewish world. And so, I'm briefly, very briefly, going to try to explain why they're not separate categories, how they're connected.

There's four things we need to understand. I'm going to go through these quickly. The first one is that holiness for the Jews was about maintaining relationship with a holy God, maintaining fellowship with a holy God.

[3 : 36] Many times throughout the book of Leviticus, God says, you shall be holy for I am holy. That's number one. Number two is that holiness for the Jews was about maintaining their distinct identity as God's chosen people.

Their distinct identity in separation from the rest of the pagan world. Again, in Leviticus, God says, you shall be holy to me, for I, the Lord, am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

That's number two. Number three is that holiness, distinction from the pagan world, and maintained fellowship with a holy God comes through obedience to the law.

It comes through obeying God's commands as set out in the Old Testament scriptures. And so you can imagine, the Jews put a lot of time and energy into studying their scriptures, much like us, right?

And they put a lot of time and energy into figuring out how exactly do we obey God's commands in every detail of life. And that leads us to our fourth and final point.

[4 : 48] The development of the tradition of the elders, which our passage talks about, came about because God's people were concerned with obeying God's commands in the Old Testament.

The tradition of the elders was a separate set of laws that spelled out the specific applications and the specific implications of God's commands in the Old Testament for all the daily details of life.

The laws were really important. They set a sort of hedge or a boundary around God's word. And one of these laws was that the Jews should wash their hands before they eat.

And the primary concern was to maintain holiness. It was all about holiness. So that's why the Pharisees and scribes were absolutely outraged when they show up and they see Jesus' disciples not washing their hands.

They're breaking the tradition of the elders. They don't care about holiness. So in verse five, they asked Jesus, why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders?

[5 : 59] But they eat with defiled hands. I mean, they're basically saying to Jesus, Jesus, why are your disciples acting like unrighteous pagans? And why do you not care one bit about holiness?

Now at this point, if you're anything like me, you think their question is quite reasonable. Sounds pretty reasonable, doesn't it? I mean, if holiness was the key, then watching Jews neglect the customs that develop to maintain holiness would seem quite absurd, right?

I mean, I want to ask Jesus, yeah, Jesus, why were your disciples eating with unwashed hands?

Why were they breaking the tradition of the elders? But the interesting thing is that Jesus responds to their question by not answering it.

Jesus doesn't answer their question. Rather, he responds and he says, you've completely missed it. You've completely missed it.

And then Jesus tells them why they've missed it. And then Jesus tells them what the true problem is. In verses 6 to 13 of Jesus' response, he reveals to the Pharisees and scribes why they have misdiagnosed the problem.

[7 : 23] And then in verses 14 to 23, he reveals what the true problem is. He takes them straight to the source of the problem. The Pharisees and the scribes get it wrong, says Jesus, because their hearts are far from God.

They have misplaced priorities and misguided loyalties. Look at verses 6 and 7. Jesus quotes Isaiah 29, 13.

When Jesus looks at the religious zeal of the Pharisees and scribes, he smells hypocrisy.

And according to Jesus, hypocrisy has to do with honoring God with your words, but not with your heart. Hypocrisy has to do with seeming to worship God, but really prioritizing human authority over his.

And it's this last point, the prioritizing of human authority, that Jesus really drives home. I mean, he drives the nail home in verses 8 to 13. The heart condition of the scribes and the Pharisees is revealed most clearly in that they love their traditions more than God's word.

[8 : 58] Jesus highlights this for us in three places. Look at verse 8. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.

And then Jesus states it even more intensely in verse 9. You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition. And then Jesus states it most definitively in verse 13.

You make void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And this word make void is literally a legal term.

It occurs very rarely in the New Testament. And it means to nullify or null. So they literally have made the voice of God invalid in order to uphold their traditions.

And the scary thing, I mean, this is, when I think about this personally, the truly scary thing is that the Pharisees and the scribes believe that what they are doing is an expression of heart, of devotion to God.

[10 : 03] They really believe it. But Jesus looks at them and says, what you're doing is an expression of heart rebellion against God. This is a rebellion that is cloaked in religious devotion.

The Pharisees ask about hand washing. And Jesus reveals to them the condition of their hearts. One author puts it this way.

He said, it's as if the scribes and Pharisees walk up to Jesus and his disciples and say, wash your hands, you sinners. What are you doing? And it's like Jesus turns around and looks at them and he says, purify your hearts, you hypocrites.

And this is just where we need to pause. It would be so easy for us to scoff at them, right? And to move on. But then we would be missing it.

We would be just like them. Judging while failing to see the fact that our own hearts are far from the living God. And I think what's amazing about this is I think Jesus wants to offer us an opportunity to actually discover a reflection of our own heart in the Pharisees and the scribes.

[11:21] God's word often works like this, doesn't it? It's like a mirror revealing to us the true condition of our hearts. Revealing to us the deceptive ways in which our religious devotion can mask the rebellion that's really on the inside.

We're so much like the scribes and Pharisees if we're honest, right? At least I know I am. I'm reminded of those great lines from the hymn, Come Thou Fount.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave, the God I love. I think it's no mistake that when we sing that hymn, our voices rise and get most passionate during the most sobering lines of the hymn because we feel it and we know it's true of us.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave, the God I love. God, goodness how true that is of me. But we must be careful.

We must be careful not to mistake the traditions of for the living God. The traditions of man for the living God. Now please don't hear me saying that tradition is not good.

[12:39] I simply don't think that's true. If any of you know me or get to know me, you'll know that I'm the last person that will say that.

I love tradition. I think that we can't live without traditions. I mean, just watch what happens at Christmas or go watch one of my favorite movies, Fiddler on the Roof, and it will show you how tradition is important to our lives.

I'm kind of tempted to do the dance and the song, but I'm not going to. But our whole life is embedded in a web, in a matrix of traditions.

But what I'm trying to say, because I think what Jesus is trying to say, is that traditions should take us by the hand and lead us up to the living God. They should never seek to dethrone him.

Traditions should be a means to an end and never the end in and of themselves. And as soon as tradition loses touch with God and as soon as tradition seeks to try to replace God's word, then it becomes lifeless.

[13:46] It becomes void. It becomes even dangerous and idolatrous. Let me give you a personal example. About two and a half years ago, I fell in love with the book of common prayer.

For those of you that don't know what that is, it's the little red book that's in front of you on the pews. I know some of you are probably laughing at me, probably thinking, like, who is this guy?

And what world does he come from? At least, that's what my family thinks of me. And others of you are probably secretly leaping with joy inside, but you just don't want others to know.

It's okay. You can come out. But seriously, I fell in love with the book of common prayer because I loved its prayers. My goodness, I loved its prayers. I loved its liturgies. I loved its structures that it gave me, and I found deep wells of spiritual grace there.

I mean, it even got to a point where there was a few months there where my bedtime reading was the liturgies from the book of common prayer. I'd read through, like, the baptismal liturgy before I went to sleep.

[14:57] Yeah, so. But, one day, God made it clear to me, and this is really the point, is that God made it clear to me while praying one day. He said, Jordan, you've missed it.

The prayers of this book have become the end in and of themselves for you, and they've replaced me. I heard him saying to me, Jordan, this book was designed by faithful people to be a help, to be a guide to lively conversation and communion with me, but you've substituted it for that conversation and communion.

My prayers became rigid, they became stale, and they became lifeless. Tradition had taken the place of the living God. I, like the scribes and Pharisees, can so easily miss it.

I think we can so easily miss it. Do you feel that? But this is the good news, friends. The good news is that Jesus does not leave us in our darkness.

He does not leave our problem undiagnosed. He tells it to us straight. Look at verses 14 and 15.

Hear me, all of you, and understand.

[16:15] There's 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. Jesus basically says that the Pharisees and scribes concerned for holiness has completely missed it because it fails to deal with the true source of defilement.

It fails to deal with the true source of defilement. They thought the problem was outside of themselves. They thought the greatest enemies that attack holiness come from the outside. But they were wrong, according to Jesus. Jesus says the greatest enemies come from the inside, actually. It's the evil that comes from the human heart. Listen to what he says in verses 20 to 23. What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts. Evil thoughts.

Now this phrase could literally be evil schemings, evil musings, and there should be a colon after evil thoughts, followed by 12 examples of the evil that can come out of the human heart.

[17:31] The first six examples are in the plural, meaning they refer to repeated actions. They refer to actions. Listen to this. Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness.

And the last six are in the singular, meaning they refer to heart attitudes. Heart attitudes. Deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.

All things come from within, says Jesus, and they defile a person. Friends, I've come up here this morning to tell you that the human heart is a fountain of evil.

This is not a fun diagnosis to deliver. But it's the way Jesus diagnosis the problem. And it's completely radical in our culture.

And it's completely radical for us because we naturally don't want to think this way. That's why we need Jesus to reveal it to us. That's why we have passages like Mark chapter 7.

[18:45] But what I want us to see now is that this diagnosis is so important for us because it is the starting point of true healing and restoration.

restoration. It's kind of like a doctor, right? You don't start the healing and the treatment until you have the diagnosis. It's only when you've come to the end of yourself that you know that you're helpless, that you're ready for Jesus to free you.

It's only when Jesus has exposed the evil of our hearts that we are then in a place for Jesus to renovate our hearts. I'll never forget the day I became a Christian.

It was the hardest day of my life and the best day of my life at the exact same time. It was the hardest day of my life. It's coming up on 10 years by the way which is pretty exciting.

But the hardest day of my life because Jesus cut straight through all my deception and all my pride and all my ignorance and it's as if he opened up to me on that day my heart and just showed it to me and said Jordan look.

[19:56] Look at the sensuality. Look at the envy. Look at the pride and the foolishness. That was hard to look at the reality of my heart.

But it was also the most glorious day of my life because there was something so freeing about that. When it was all laid out there, when I finally knew my heart condition and that I needed help, Jesus could restore and he could renovate and he could renew.

Brothers and sisters, we can't back down from this fundamental truth that the human heart is a fountain of evil. The world needs to know this.

We need to know this. I mean, it's amazing to me that after the atrocities of the last century, most of us can still believe that we are innately good inside.

And I'm not talking about people just outside of these walls. I mean, us here often believe that deep down inside. But we will never know freedom unless we first know how we are bound.

[21:07] On the other hand, we cannot despair. On the one hand, we can't promote a false hope, a hope rooted in the goodness of the human heart, or a hope rooted in religious observance.

But on the other hand, we cannot despair. There's far too much of that in the world. We live in a culture that believes there's no meaning to life.

We live in a society that doesn't know what to do when it stares in the face of evil, offers no true hope to people.

We have to offer true hope. true hope. And I believe that the way we offer true hope is we tell the rest of the story. This is Advent season, and it's time to tell the story.

This is Advent season. We must tell people that this Jesus who diagnoses the sickness of our heart is the same Jesus who was born in a manger 2,000 years ago.

[22 : 09] God with us to save us. We must tell people that this Jesus who unveils the evil of the human heart is the same Jesus who takes all of that sin upon his shoulders, and then he walks the road to Calvary.

We must tell people that this Jesus who says no to all of our wickedness and pride is the same Jesus who gets up on the cross, hangs there, and says it is finished.

And we must tell people that this Jesus is the same Jesus who baptizes us in the Holy Spirit so that he can start a complete renovation of the heart and give us a new heart.

We must tell people that this Jesus wants to baptize us in the spirit so that he can replace this list that we find in Mark chapter 7 with a list that we find in Galatians chapter 5.

Jesus wants to replace all of our coveting and our wickedness and our pride and our foolishness with love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control.

[23 : 30] love and this is the gospel story. That's why we can leave here today having had the evil of our hearts exposed and yet we can walk out into the world profoundly full of hope.

This my friends is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. God bless you.