

# The First Sunday of Advent

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[ 0 : 00 ] Lord, unless you speak, I will speak in vain. And unless you open our hearts, we listen in vain.

So would you speak and would you open our hearts, we ask. In your name, amen. You may be seated. As we've made quite clear, today 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 with Mark chapter 7.

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

It's that time of the year where we prepare for the celebration and the festivity that is about to come at Christmas. And we're starting with Mark chapter 7.

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

And we are beginning with Mark chapter 7. Jesus is going to reveal to us one of the greatest problems of our lives. He's going to reveal to us the problem that actually lies underneath most of our other problems.

And he's going to reveal to us the source of all, of much of the evil and destruction that we experience in our world. And surprisingly, Jesus is going to do it by telling us about our hearts. He's going to tell us that the human heart is a fountain of evil. How the heck does he get there? And that's what we're going to look at in our passage.

Interestingly, it all begins with a deep-seated concern for holiness. Our passage begins with a deep-seated concern for holiness, and it ends up with Jesus telling us that our hearts are a fountain of evil.

[ 2 : 19 ] Let's start with verses 1 to 5. The Pharisees and some of the scribes gather around Jesus, and when they gather around him, they see that some of his disciples are eating with unwashed hands, and they are absolutely appalled.

They're outraged. Why? Why would they be outraged? Is it because they are particularly concerned with personal hygiene? No.

Is it because they are germaphobic? No. It's because they are concerned with holiness. Jesus' disciples were eating with unwashed hands, meaning they were breaking the tradition of the elders, which means they actually did not care about holiness.

Now, some of you may be thinking at this point, what does washing hands and tradition of the elders have to do with holiness? Those seem like really distinct categories.

Well, let me try to explain as briefly as I possibly can that all three of these are actually deeply interconnected. Four things you need to understand. Holiness for the Jews was about maintaining fellowship with a holy God.

[ 3 : 34 ] Many times throughout the book of Leviticus, God says, you shall be holy, for I am holy. Maintaining fellowship with a holy God. That's number one. Number two, is that holiness for the Jews was about maintaining their distinct identity as God's chosen people.

In distinction from the pagan world. Once again, in Leviticus, God says these words, you shall be holy to me, for I, the Lord, am holy and have separated you from the peoples that you should be mine.

Holiness is about maintaining fellowship with a holy God and about being distinct from the pagan world. And the third thing is that holiness for the Jews was achieved through obeying the law.

Through following God's commands as set out in the Old Testament scriptures. And so as you can imagine, the Jews put a lot of time and energy into studying the scriptures, much like us here at St. John's.

And they also put a lot of time and energy into deciphering exactly how they can obey God's commands in all the specific details of their life. And that's what leads to point number four, the tradition of the elders.

[ 4 : 53 ] The tradition of the elders was created to make sure that God's people obeyed God's commands in the Old Testament. It was a separate set of laws to be sure, but it was a set of laws that tried to work out the applications and implications of God's commands in the Old Testament for daily life.

And one of those laws, just one of the many, was you should not eat without first washing your hands.

The primary concern was holiness. It was a holiness issue. And that's why the Pharisees and scribes are so outraged. They're like, you're not eating with washed hands.

You're breaking the tradition of the elders. Look at verse five. They asked Jesus, why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?

I mean, basically, they're saying to Jesus, Jesus, why do your disciples act like unrighteous pagans? And why do you not care one single bit about holiness?

[ 6 : 07 ] Now, at this point, if you're anything like me, you may be thinking, well, this sounds kind of reasonable. Right? I mean, if holiness was so important to Jewish identity, and if these customs were developed, the intention being to maintain holiness, then, yeah, Jesus, why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?

why do they eat with undefiled hands? But Jesus responds to their question by not answering their question. Jesus responds by not answering their question.

Rather, he basically says, you've completely missed it. You've completely missed the problem. You've misdiagnosed the problem. And then, Jesus tells them why they've misdiagnosed the problem, and he tells them what the true problem actually is.

In verses 6 to 13, Jesus reveals to the Pharisees and scribes why they have misdiagnosed the problem. And then, in verses 14 to 23, Jesus reveals what the true problem is.

He takes them straight to the source of the main issue. The scribes and the Pharisees, we find out, get it wrong because their hearts are far from God.

[ 7 : 25 ] They have misplaced priorities and misguided loyalties. Look at verses 6 and 7. Jesus quotes Isaiah 29 and 13. 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. 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. It has to do with seemingly worshiping God, but actually prioritizing human authority over him.

And this last point, the prioritizing of human authority, is what he really drives home in verses 8 to 13. The heart condition of the Pharisees and scribes is revealed most clearly, says Jesus, through the fact that the Pharisees and scribes love their traditions more than the word of the living God. 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.

[ 8 : 53 ] 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 makes the definitive statement in verse 13.

You make void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And this word make void, this is a really unusual word.

It means to nullify or null. It's a legal term. So what Jesus is saying is they have literally made the voice of God invalid in order to establish their tradition.

And the scary thing is, my friends, this is really scary for me, is that the Pharisees and the scribes actually believe that what they are doing is an expression of devotion to God.

They really believe it. But Jesus looks at it and he says, no, this is actually an expression of heart rebellion against God.

[ 9 : 57 ] This is rebellion cloaked in religious devotion. Pharisees and scribes begin by asking Jesus about unwashed hands and he tells them about the condition of their heart.

I mean, one author described it this way. It's as if the Pharisees and scribes walk up to Jesus and his disciples and say, what are you doing? Wash your hands, you sinners. sinners. And then Jesus looks back and responds and says, purify your hearts, you hypocrites.

Now, it's at this point that I think we need to pause for a moment because it would be so easy for us to scoff at the scribes and the Pharisees and simply to move on, right?

They're being legalistic. They're being ridiculous. But then, I think, if we did that, we would actually be just like them. judging others while failing to see that our own hearts are far from God.

And I believe that we'd be missing a profound opportunity that God is offering us here to actually look at the Pharisees and the scribes and discover something of our own reflection in them.

[ 11 : 14 ] God's word often acts like this. It's often like a mirror, revealing to us the true condition of our hearts, revealing to us the deceptive ways in which our religious devotion can often mask our rebellion.

We're not too unlike the scribes and Pharisees if we're honest with ourselves. Are we not? I'm reminded of those great lines from the hymn Come Thou Fount.

You know these ones. Prone to wander Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. And I think it's no mistake that when we sing that hymn together we sing most passionately when we sing the two most sobering lines of the entire hymn.

Because we feel it. 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. We must be careful that we don't mistake our traditions for the living God.

Now please don't hear me saying tradition is not good. I really fear this here because I fear this with a lot of the generations here that we look at this passage and we see Jesus saying all tradition is horrible.

[ 12 : 38 ] That's not what Jesus is saying. I just want to make that very clear. It's simply not true. And when you hear me say this know that I say this for those of you that know me as one who actually deeply loves traditions.

And we can't live without them ultimately. I mean just look at the Christmas season. Or go watch one of my favorite movies Fiddler on the Roof and that will show you what it's all about.

I'm kind of tempted to sing and dance but I won't for your sake. The point is that our whole life is actually embedded in a web in a matrix of traditions.

But what I'm trying to say the point I want to make because I think Jesus is making this point is that traditions are meant to take us by the hand and lead us up to the living God.

They're never meant to dethrone him. Traditions are meant to be a means to an end and never an end in and of themselves. Because when tradition loses touch with God or when it replaces his word then it becomes lifeless and void and possibly even dangerous and idolatrous.

[ 13 : 56 ] Let me give you an example. About two and a half years ago I fell in love with the book of common prayer. Now if you don't know what that is that's the little little red book in the pew in front of you.

It should be somewhere in the yeah it's that that's it. I know that some of you are probably laughing at me probably thinking at this point like who is this guy and what world does he come from?

I assure you I'm still from planet earth and others of you may be leaping inside and you just don't want others to know. But seriously I fell in love with this this book of common prayer I loved its liturgies I loved its structures and especially I loved its prayers.

Oh the prayers are so rich in it. And but the problem is is that God made it clear to me one day after about a year of using this book God made it clear to me that I had actually missed the point of the book altogether.

that the book its prayers and its structures and its liturgies had actually started to replace a lively conversation and communion with God.

[ 15 : 14 ] What it was meant to do is being a launching pad into fellowship with God it actually became an end in and of itself for me. And my prayers became rigid and they became stale and they became devoid of life.

the tradition of the book of common prayer took the place of God. Now all of you should use the book of common prayer if you're able to but in my experience in that one moment I still use it now but that was a reformation for me because I had realized that the tradition had become the point

and not God.

We like the Pharisees can so easily miss it. We can do this can't we? But there's good news and I love good news and 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 verse 14 and 15.

Hear me all of you and understand there's nothing outside of 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 has failed to deal with the true source of what defiles us.

[16:40] They thought that what kills holiness comes from the outside. They thought that the greatest enemies to their holiness came from the outside but they got it completely wrong.

Jesus tells us that the greatest enemies to their holiness is actually from the inside. That the true problem lies in the human heart. Listen to what he says in verses 20 and 23.

What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within out of the heart of man come evil thoughts. This last phrase evil thoughts could literally be translated evil schemings or evil musings and there should be a colon after it followed by 12 examples of the evil that can flow from the human heart.

The first six are in the plural meaning they refer to actions. They refer to actions. Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness.

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

[18:03] And all these evil things come from the heart says Jesus and it's they that defile us.

Friends, it's the beginning of Advent and I've come here to tell you that the human heart is a fountain of evil.

This is a unique diagnosis of the problem. It's Jesus' diagnosis and our culture doesn't believe this in many respects and I think that it's so hard for us to think this way because it's not natural to us. That's why we need Jesus to tell us, to reveal it to us. But the thing that I really want you to see is that this diagnosis is so important not as an end in and of itself.

It's so important because it is the starting point of true restoration and healing. It's like a doctor, right? Treatment doesn't start until you first have a diagnosis.

It's only when you come to the end of yourself, when you realize your helplessness, that then you are ready for Jesus to start freeing and restoring you.

[19:17] It's only when Jesus has opened up the evil of your heart that you are ready for him to start renovating your heart. I'll never forget the day I became a Christian.

It was one of the best days of my life and one of the worst days of my life. It was one of the worst days of my life because Jesus cut through all my deception and all my empty zeal or misguided zeal and he opened up my heart and he said, Jordan, take a look.

Envy, pride, foolishness. But it was also the greatest day of my life. A glorious day because Jesus put everything out in the open.

He put it all out and he brought me to a point where I was ready to receive his restoration and his healing and his forgiveness. It was ready to begin at that moment.

And that's why, brothers and sisters, we can't back down from this truth. The human heart is a fountain of evil. The world needs to know this and we need to know this.

[20:31] I mean, even after the atrocities of the last century, we still believe, many of us, that we're good deep down inside. But we will never know freedom unless we first know how we are bound by evil.

But I also want to say that we must beware of despair. On the one hand, we cannot promote a false hope. We can't promote a hope rooted in the goodness of our heart or a hope rooted in religious observance.

But on the other hand, we can't offer no true hope. The world is full of despair. Our culture, in many respects, believes there's no ultimate meaning to life.

And our society doesn't know what to do when faced with evil. There's no true hope. And so we must offer true hope.

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