

# Sermon for September 16, 2018 – “To Wash or Not to Wash...”

Text(s): Mark 7:1-23

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One thing people love about Mark’s gospel is that it’s short. Matthew has 28 chapters, Luke 24, John has 21, Mark has 16. Looking at the number of words; Luke uses 19,482, Matthew 18,346, John uses 15,635, Mark uses 11,304. Like I said...short! So, Mark’s not about expanding or unravelling the story of Jesus. He only gives us the minimum of details. And, of course, there’s the whole “messianic secret” thing that runs throughout the gospel where Jesus is always telling His disciples not to tell anyone that He’s the messiah. Scholars have suggested that Mark does this for a reason and the reason, they say, is that Mark wants us to wonder; even more, he wants us to ask questions. They say that if we aren’t wondering what the heck’s going on after a reading from Mark’s gospel, or if we aren’t asking questions about it then we aren’t listening. All that said, I just need to let you know now that this morning’s reading is **not** about washing hands.

As we begin the reading Jesus and His disciples are just minding their own business while they eat lunch. Some of the Pharisees and scribes had come down from Jerusalem to see what Jesus is up to, probably worried about the crowds He’d been attracting. And when these Pharisees and scribes see that the disciples are eating with unwashed hands, well, they begin to make a stink about it with Jesus. And Jesus isn’t happy – oh no. He berates the accusers. He even calls them hypocrites and says to them and to the crowd that had gathered, **“Listen to me, all of you, and understand...There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile but the things that come out are what defile.”** Then Jesus goes on to name an extensive list of sinful behaviors and concludes with this gem, “All these evil things come from within and they defile a person.” You gotta love when Jesus really sticks it to these guys. And here, He’s telling them about the things that **really** defile. As I said, this isn’t a story about washing hands. The judgmental question, accusation, that the Pharisees make about hand washing is what sets Jesus off on His tirade. And while His response is to swiftly condemn the things that truly defile, hand washing is only the pretext for the Pharisees and scribes. The reason they give for their judgment isn’t the real reason. Think of it this way, if they really cared about hand washing they’d have stopped the disciples **before** they started eating. Or at the very least their question to Jesus would’ve been “Why are they eating with dirty hands that can make them sick?” Instead, the Pharisees and scribes ask about something that’s not really about hand washing. They ask, “Why do Your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?” So, why is Jesus upset? Well, first of all, because Jews believed that the law had been given to them by God through Moses. But the Pharisees are placing their faith not so much in the law itself but in their elders and ancestors and the traditions that they’d fostered over the centuries. And, they seem to be more than a little confused as to what faithfulness is all about. They’re trying to be faithful by appearing to follow the rules. They lived in a world that values staying the same. They learned their way of life from their parents, who learned from their parents, who learned from their parents. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing mind you, after all, we talked last week on Grandparents Day about the important of passing faith on to subsequent generations. And we must remember that Israel was an occupied territory in those days. It was crucially important to the Jews that they maintain their Jewish identity, especially when Hellenistic, that is Greek and Roman cultural influence was so strong and pervasive.

Whether an urbanite or a villager Judaism was about fealty to the “Law of Moses.” This meant, of course, keeping the commandments which gave (and still give) form to the Jews covenant with God. On the most noticeable level this meant the Jewish dietary laws, observance of the Sabbath and festivals and ritual circumcision. Equally important, it meant distancing oneself from the perceived depravity of the Greeks and Roman.

But as important as the Law was as a way of maintaining Jewish identity, it was also important on a practical level. Washing hands and other rules of ritual cleanliness were meant to keep the people of Israel safe and healthy which were really important in a time of poor sanitation, poor hygiene, and an almost complete lack of scientific medical knowledge. No antibiotics. No antiseptics. No Neosporin. So, the rules were meant to be of service to human beings. Unfortunately, the Pharisees had become servants to the rules. Faithfulness had stopped being about living in right and healthy relationships with each other, with creation, and with God. Faithfulness. Righteousness. Knowing that you were in right standing with God. All these things were now about keeping the rules, rules that made generation after generation faithful and righteous too. So, when Jesus lectures the Pharisees about what truly defiles them, He’s challenging how they understand righteousness, how they understand salvation, how they understand faithfulness. The Pharisees think that following rules, even ones that’ve been handed down for generation after generation, is what makes them faithful. They think it’s what makes them worthy of being loved by God and being chosen by God. It goes without saying that this is something we struggle with too.

Lots of times we do things because we’ve always done them and do them the way we’ve always done them. It can be very easy for us to lose sight of big picture. We can become stuck in ruts. We can come to fear change out of a sense of loyalty to the past to those who came before us forgetting why they did what they did in the first place and are left with doing things for the sake of doing them. There are what I call “sacred cows” everywhere. I’ve witnessed people complaining about having to do something but bristle when it’s suggested that it might be time to re-think the thing or that its season may be over. This isn’t to say that much of what we do isn’t important or is completely without meaning, but when we lose sight of why we do something or discover that it’s not so much about God as it is about us in some way, then something is wrong. I realize that by no means is this an easy lesson – I really do. But, it’s a lesson we must learn if the church is to move forward, if the church is to survive. Think about it. Times change. People change. Our abilities and our capabilities change. Understandings change. Doesn’t it make sense then that we change too? Might it not mean that it’s time to consider how something might be done differently? or that something’s run its course and had its day?

The good news is that we’ve begun to have these types of conversations but we’ve still a way to go. And so, when Jesus challenges our ideas of righteousness, faithfulness, things like forgiveness and salvation, when we discover that following certain rules or doing something a particular way aren’t why God loves us, we have to wonder what does make God love us? I bet most of you know the answer to that question. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing...Nothing can make God love us because God already does! God’s love can’t be earned or achieved. God’s grace is freely given which means that washing our hands, doing things we’ve always done in ways we’ve always done them doesn’t affect God’s love for us one whit. In fact, God’s love for us has nothing to do with those things. It has to do with who **God** is and who **we** are. It has to do with God loving us because we **belong** to God. It’s the love of the Creator for the created, the love of a parent for a child.

We're loved by God and everything should flow from that. What we do, **all** we do, should be in grateful response to who God is and what God has done for us in our lives, in our homes, in our church.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.