

Cleanliness is Next to Godliness

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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Good morning. Grace, mercy, and peace to you this morning from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

When my brother and I were reluctant to wash up after playing outside, our dear mother, God rest her soul, would say "*You know - Cleanliness is next to Godliness*" as a way to prod us into action. I am sure many of you have heard that saying too. The exact phrase is not found in the Bible but the concept is clearly expressed. Actual and spiritual purification, ablutions, and washings are featured prominently in Old Testament Jewish ceremonial rituals.

For the Hebrew people, cleanliness wasn't "next to godliness," but was absolutely part of it. The standards God established concerning cleanness for the Israelites touched on every aspect of their lives. Ritual purification was a matter of extreme importance in Israelite worship. God required His people to be a pure and holy nation (Exodus 19:6). For the Jews, holiness had to be reflected in the way they lived, giving utmost priority to the moral and spiritual virtues that God had revealed in His laws. Unlike all the other nations, God had given his covenant people specific instructions concerning hygiene and cleanness. He showed them how to maintain purity, and what to do to regain it if they lost it through carelessness or disobedience.

The issue of cleanliness was central to the confrontation described today in the Gospel reading. Jesus had created a great deal of attention during His preaching trip in Galilee. He had miraculously healed people, cast out demons, fed over 5,000 people, and mysteriously traveled between two places without any means of transport. He drew the attention of King Herod who heard about Jesus and inquired about Him. And news about Jesus also reached religious officials in Jerusalem. They sent a fact-finding commission to investigate Jesus and His reported actions. The fact-finders were Pharisees, the dominant religious party, and their assistants, the scribes who recorded the rules that the Pharisees maintained. As Jesus' popularity grew and His acts became more extraordinary, the Pharisees grew increasingly annoyed with Jesus. He was a maverick and did not

observe their traditions for ritual purity. No one knew what learned teacher had trained Jesus to be a rabbi. And worse, He even implied that He was from God with the power to forgive sins. Meanwhile, the crowds grew larger and the miracles increased in number and intensity.

In the Gospel today, Jesus was attacked indirectly when the Pharisees, made charges against His disciples. They had used that ploy before (see Mark 2). These fact finders claimed that Jesus' disciples had eaten food without properly washing their hands according to ***“the tradition of the elders.”*** Notice that the Pharisees conceded in their claim that these were violations of laws of tradition not the Law of God. They were implying that all of them were sinners because they were unclean with respect to the purity traditions of the Jewish religion.

Now maybe some explanations of all this are in order. This is not about hygiene. The Pharisees and scribes were not saying, *“Gosh, Your disciples might get sick if they don't practice cleanliness,”* as if they were concerned with their welfare. It is about religion. The Pharisees were the dominant sect of Judaism. The word Pharisee meant “set apart.” The foundation of their belief was the Old Testament words of God, ***“You shall be holy, for I am holy.”*** (Leviticus 11:44 and 19:2). The Greek word used for holy or holiness is “hagios” and means much the same thing that the Old Testament word “godesh.” Both mean “pure, morally blameless” or “set apart.” So do you see the connection to the Pharisees?

The problem was how could God's people then, and now, be holy or pure, morally blameless, and set apart? God tells us. We do so by perfect obedience to His Laws. That is what God expects of all of His people, you and I included. Now, the Law of God for His chosen people of Israel was extensive. The Law was given on Mount Sinai in the first four books of the Bible. The word “Torah” means “instruction or teaching.” The Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy all contain the Law. Imbedded in the Book of Exodus is the Decalogue or, as the Ten Words, which we call the Ten Commandments. The fundamental Law of God for all people. The Law was part of the Covenant between God and His chosen people. For the Jews, holiness had to be reflected in the way they lived, giving utmost priority to the moral and spiritual virtues that God had revealed in His laws. God expected obedience to His Law and in return, He would be their God and provide abundantly for them. Nothing has changed. The same is true today for all of us in our relationship with God.

Most of those Old Testament laws had some very ethical, practical, and sound reasons for their existence. All of them defined God's people as special (people who were set apart) because they defined God who had given them and was Himself set apart as holy, holy, holy. God was holy – that is pure, and so He expected His people to be holy or pure. He expects the same of us.

Now, I am sure you can see the problem that arose. Which one of you here this morning can say you are holy, pure, in the sight of God based upon His measure of holiness? We are not holy and we are not pure with regard to His Law and thus we are unable to honor God to the level of His expectations. That also puts us in jeopardy of His wrath and a loss of His favor. The Pharisees came to that conclusion too. They realized they could not fulfill the letter of God's Law. So, over time, they developed some alternatives to fulfilling the requirements of God's Law. Today, we might call them workarounds. They redefined and added to the original Law of God according to their interpretations. And the Pharisees demanded that all Jews live their lives according to this body of man-made law which came to be called the Mishneh Torah as opposed to the Torah which was the written Law. These additional laws first started to appear in 500 B.C. before Jesus and were passed down orally until the scribes began to write them down. The complete code of laws was not completely recorded until A.D. 200 and had consisted of 613 rules or commandments created by humans. The Pharisees were obsessed with these man-made rules (especially those concerning purity). And they saw themselves as being the only ones who were pure because they were the only ones strictly following these rules, they scorned anyone who did not as sinners and outcasts.

It is like a story I once heard. A woman was listening to the news when it was reported that a car was going in the wrong direction on the interstate. The woman knew her husband was on that road traveling home from work. She became very concerned that her husband might be in jeopardy so she called him on her cell phone. When he answered, she said, *"Honey, I just heard there's a car going the wrong direction on the interstate."* Her husband responded, *"One car! There are hundreds of them!"* That was the attitude of the Pharisees toward those who didn't act like them.

At the heart of this body of law was the need to be ritually clean. To be pure; to be holy. Being holy meant not being unclean or defiled. There were many ways one could become defiled based on Old Testament Law such as coming in contact with unclean animals, with things carrying disease, people who were diseased, people who had sinned, or anything or

anyone that had blood on it, a dead body. A person was to avoid contact with such things at all costs, but if they did come in contact with them the Law stipulated the need for purification by washing. (Leviticus 11:28 and 14: 47 are two examples).

Ritual washing all pointed back to God's decree that the Temple priests were to wash before they began service in the Temple or before they made a food offering to the Lord so they were pure (Exodus 30). That was the basis for the rule that Jesus' disciples were accused of violating. In Jesus' day, going into the marketplace meant the potential for coming in contact with things that defiled a person and with people who defiled a person, especially Gentiles, knowingly or not. Therefore on returning home, and before eating, washing was required to be ritually clean.

Like I said, this had nothing to do with hygiene. It was a matter of ritual. It had to be done EVEN IF a person's hands were spotless. This was the prescribed means to fulfill the Law of God, to honor and please God, and be pure – holy, in His sight. Failure to do so exactly in this way was to sin according to the Pharisees.

Can you see the problem? When they claimed that Jesus was disobedient to God because His disciples did not wash according to their prescribed methods, they were saying He was a sinner and therefore not God. And sin was defined as disobedience to a law created by man. Being clean in the eyes of God was by NOT following a ritual. It was NOT because of obedience to the Law God had decreed. The truth of the matter is that the Pharisees were hiding behind that man-made laws and not showing true obedience to God. Jesus responded to their charges against His disciples by calling them, hypocrites.

The word hypocrite literally means, "One who hides behind a mask." The person's real face is hidden. He is two-faced. The Pharisees were just that. They used their man-made face to cover their real sinful face. They showed a clean outward appearance but hid their unclean inward appearance. They were clean by man's standards because that is what was seen on the outside, but their hearts were dirty by God's standards and that was hidden on the inside. That is often the accusation from the world about us. A person says they will not go to church because all the people there are hypocrites. A good answer to that charge is, "Well, ok, then, we have plenty of room for one more at church."

To prove His point, Jesus showed how the Pharisees used their laws to avoid fulfilling God's Law regarding the fourth Commandment. "Corban" was any funds that a person dedicated to God. This money could not be used for any other purpose including funds that might be used for supporting elderly parents their old age. The Pharisees hid behind this law to evade the Fourth Commandment. If their wealth was willed to God, they reasoned, they could claim they had no funds to care for their elderly parents. Sorry, mom and dad. God comes first and His fourth commandment will have to wait. Man-made law trumped God's law. Jesus used this as an example of how people had created a man-made law to evade a God-made Law. Do you see the hypocrisy here?

But there is more to this profanity of God's Law. Pharisees were usually wealthy. They could afford the time and the cost of ritual washing. Water was a scarce commodity in the ancient world. Ordinary people could not afford the luxury of using water in such rituals and if they could afford the water, they could not afford the time for them. So, ordinary people came to believe that they were sinners in the eyes of God because they could not fulfill these man-made rules. For these reasons, Jesus quoted Isaiah. He said these people worship God with their lips (their outward persona), while their hearts are still dirty with sin, their worship is in vain. They were hypocrites. They were more interested in proving their holiness, proving the level of their devotion than they were in fulfilling the Law of God in their behavior!

Now, the whole Law of God can be summed up in one word, "love." The Ten Commandments can be summed up as Love of God (The First Table - the first three commandments) and love of neighbor (The Second Table Commandments four through ten). Jesus was, and is, more concerned with showing love to God His Father and all of us, God's children. Jesus sought out sinners, those who were defiled according to the Pharisees. Jesus sought out those who the Pharisees avoided. Sinners, the sick, the dying, those who had hemorrhages, lepers, prostitutes, those who were demon-possessed, Gentiles, and people who were sinners like you and me. All the kinds of people that the Pharisees scorned as sinners for their disobedience to their laws. All those who appeared to be unholy, impure, and unacceptable to God.

We can often fall into the same trap as the Pharisees. We know that we fail in fulfilling the Law of God by not loving God and our neighbors. The Law accuses us and condemns us and that doesn't feel good. The Old Adam in us doesn't want to be accused. So we try to justify ourselves. We find ways

to twist or redirect the Law's focus and intensity. Like the Pharisees, we try to find workarounds. We think if I do this or do that or say this or say that – God and especially my neighbors will see how good I am. Then we go on to say, Lord I really sincerely meant to do the right thing but I failed. I actually didn't do what you expected. Lord, I know You said that was a sin, BUT look at what I did do instead. We come up with self-justifications for our failure to obey God's Law. And even worse, many times we see ourselves as being "God-fearing" and others as being real sinners. We point to the "unholiness" in the lives of others and ignore the "unholiness" of our lives.

The problem is the same for us as it was for the Pharisees, we have to keep God's Law and not our definitions of His Law. And like them, we must realize that we cannot fulfill God's Law despite our most sincere desire to do so. We need to be cleansed of our unholiness. We need to be made pure – that is holy. We need to be holy because that is what our God demands of us. After all, that is what He is. He expects us to do everything He has required. To love Him unconditionally and love our neighbor just as much as we love ourselves. But how? Each time we try, we fail. AND our failures make us even more polluted with sin. How can we be cleansed of this pollution of sin? How are we washed clean? The sin is inside us in our hearts and needs to be expunged. It needs to be washed away. We need holy washing on the inside. Soap and water and cleaning solutions that we may use on the outside aren't the answer. But what is?

God tells us in His Word. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God tells His ancient, exiled people, and us, the answer to that problem in Ezekiel Chapter 36: 26-27, ***"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."***

And also through St. Paul in Titus 3:4-7, God tells us, ***"But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. We have been washed not with water but by God in the blood of the Lamb."***

The Pharisees and Scribes thought that Jesus and the disciples were sinners. They were worried about crossing the t's and dotting the i's for themselves. They were so concerned about being holy themselves as religious leaders that they allowed the people around them to perish in their sin because of the demands of their rules. In short, they spent their time majoring in the minors and forcing other people to do the same. They were true "nitpickers." And the real tragedy is that they did this all in the name of serving the Living God. But it was a complete perversion of God's law.

You and I must guard against the same actions of the Pharisees in our relationship with God. Listen to this little story. A man and his family went to church. On the way home, the man fussed and fumed that the sermon was too long, every traffic light on the street turned red, it was too hot and he was going to miss the beginning of the football game. When the man got home his wife made the family lunch and the man bowed his head and prayed, giving God thanks for the food. When they finished his son who had been watching from leaving the church through the prayer before lunch, asked the man, "Daddy, did God hear you when you left the church and you started complaining about the sermon and the lights and the heat and being late for the game?" The father answered, "Yes, son, He heard me." Then, the boy asked, "Well, Daddy, did He hear you when you just prayed for the food?" The man answered, "Well, yes, He...he...he heard me." The son then replied, "Well Daddy, which one did God believe?"

That is one of the lessons of this reading. Often, as the people of God, what we claim to be on the outside and what we harbor on the inside are miles apart. And for that, we are called hypocrites. We live one way in the presence of God for one or two hours a week and live another way in the world outside the church for the remaining 167 or 168 hours a week. We are sinners. We are like those Pharisees. And I hope and pray that none of us worshiping here this morning goes out into the world and accuses other people of being sinners because we attended church today. That is what the Pharisees did to Jesus and His disciples. I also hope and pray that you see the point of the Gospel reading this morning and act accordingly. I hope you are here this morning NOT to worship with your lips, not because you are saints, but because you and I are sinners. Sinners, who know we have a hard heart despite our sincere wish to be Law-abiding, God-fearing people of God but failing miserably to be pure and holy to God's standard. We also come here knowing that we must continue to strive to do better even if we fail. So, we are here to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with God and in humble repentance return back into the world knowing Jesus

was the one who has cleansed us and made us holy. He exchanged our filthy polluted hearts for His radiant heart of love.

The gospel says all who believe in Jesus and have been baptized should come and eat. God has acted to cleanse us in baptism and with the sacrificial substitute of Jesus on the cross. An act which we acknowledge and confess as unclean sinners at the Table of His body and blood. By these and only these God-made and God-ordained acts, we are made holy and radiant in Him. And in that holiness, we are invited to eat at another meal in Heaven in the presence of our God who we acknowledge as Holy, Holy, Holy.

And I hope and pray you see fit to pass down THIS tradition of faith as elders to the next generation. Faith-based on the Word and Sacraments. Faith is based on washing and eating and drinking as God's people not by what we have done or not done, but because of our unity with Christ in His death through baptism so that we will be united with Him forever in a life everlasting.

For that is the grace of God freely given to sinful people like you and me. It is the very mercy and peace which comforts us in this life and prepares and protects us, heart, mind, and spirit until we see Him face to face.... Amen.