

Washed and Free

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Date: 28 May 2023

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[0 : 0 0] I'm going to have a look at the passage we read from Mark 7. It's a bit of a longer text today for the amount that we've been looking at in the Gospel of Mark.

We carry on our series. We've got about a month left till we take a break for the summer from Mark. This is a really important passage. Jesus here answers the question, what defiles us?

So let's think about that. What defiles us? How can you become clean? And then what kind of freedom does that bring to you?

So what defiles you? How can you become clean? And then what kind of freedom do you get from that? All right, so first, what defiles us? Jesus here, if you were reading along, Jesus is having a debate with the Pharisees and scribes.

Maybe the very first thing you can learn from this is that theological debates are good, not bad. Sometimes they become bad. But Jesus never had a bad debate. They were always good, right?

[1 : 0 0] And Jesus often entered into these debates, and here's one of them. And we've learned what it's about right here in verse two. The debate is about the fact that the disciples, the Pharisees say, are not washing their hands before they sit down to dinner.

So the Pharisees and scribes are upset. They can see the disciples eating. So when you eat in the first century, the eating places are actually public. So they would oftentimes be along the main path that people would walk through.

So you could always see Jesus and the disciples gather around a table eating dinner. The Pharisees could stand right outside a house and see that. And that's what happens here. And they say, why are your disciples not washing their hands before the meal?

And they use the word actually to wash is the word in Greek to baptize, baptize. So immediately you have the sense that this has something to do with religion.

In other words, they're not saying we're upset because you're going to spread germs. People are going to get COVID if your disciples keep eating dinner without washing their hands before it has nothing to do with germs.

[2 : 0 8] They had no concept for that, not really, not like us. And instead, they're talking about a religious problem. And the word that gets used in verse two is they're not washing their hands.

Therefore, they are defiled. And that's the New Testament term for the word unclean in the Old Testament. So they're saying they're not washing their hands.

Therefore, they are unclean. And we're told here the Pharisees, they would wash their hands if they went to the marketplace because the marketplace made them unclean. They would wash their hands before meal because they know that there are all sorts of ways to become unclean.

They would wash their hands if they interacted, even came in proximity of a Samaritan, a foreigner, of a different ethnicity because they were afraid that it was going to make them unclean.

And that means that what they're talking about here is the cleanliness laws from the Old Testament. So Exodus, mainly Leviticus, and Numbers, we have these laws about cleanliness.

[3 : 07] And this is the part of the Bible where if you started your January reading plan, you broke down and gave up by the time you get to the cleanliness laws. The cleanliness laws are strange for modern people.

They're difficult to read. There's lots of them, several hundred of them. And they're very hard for a modern person to say, how in the world could this be in the Bible?

And what's going on with the cleanliness laws is the background to this passage. You can't really see what the Pharisees are saying and what Jesus is saying without getting some idea of what's going on in the Old Testament with the cleanliness laws.

We covered the cleanliness, I'm going to say this, cleanliness. I can't say it. Cleanliness laws last semester in some detail. So I won't go through them in as much detail as we did last year.

But basically it's this, that there's all these commands. Don't eat this type of food. Wash in these types of situations, particularly before you go into the temple.

[4 : 09] If you have leprosy, you're unclean. You got to go outside the camp, away from the people. If you have a baby, a mother has a baby, unclean.

And many more situations, any kind of discharge of blood, any kind of skin problem, anything like that. There's particular ways to become unclean as a man, particular ways to become unclean as a woman.

Don't touch a dead body, including an animal carcass, even after you're hunting, you become unclean. So there's all sorts of situations. And what you start to realize is there is no way to avoid this.

You have to become unclean. And in some ways that was exactly the point of the cleanliness laws. In other words, what they were doing, what God was doing, is creating a visible external reminder in almost every life situation that there is wrong, there is something wrong with the inside of us.

Another way to think about it is that these are like anti-sacraments. When the sacraments, Lord Supper or baptism, we have visible pictures of God's gospel.

[5 : 15] You can see the gospel happening in the sacraments. These are anti-sacraments. You can literally see that there is something wrong with you. And the something that's wrong with you is not giving birth.

Of course, God loves children. It's not having leprosy even. There's no sense that your sin has created that. No, in other words, these are simply visible pictures to say at every point in life that the outside is to remind us there's something wrong with the inside.

They're just symbols. They're just signs. And so God took normal practices of life and said, because this is cursed and you live in a cursed world, this is a sign of uncleanness. Or he took things that are taboo already in the ancient world, like eating certain type of things.

It was already taboo to eat pork, for example. Many, many countries, many nations in the ancient Middle East, before Israel said, don't eat pork. And you see what God's doing? He's taking something that's normal in the culture, just like we have our own normal things we all think it's gross to eat, and saying, I'm actually going to take that and say, well, I'm going to make that a symbol to remind you that when you see things that we say are unclean on the outside, it tells you there's something actually wrong on the inside of you.

It's just a simple reminder. And if you were unclean, you couldn't go into the temple. The biggest message was that if you're unclean, you cannot enter into the presence of God in the temple itself.

[6 : 39] You can't bring a sacrifice. You have to wait a certain amount of time. And the Pharisees here, you see the problem with the Pharisees, they're coming and saying, verse five, the tradition of the elders, you've got to do everything you can to make sure you never become unclean.

And so what they did was they created all these extra ways to prevent yourself from becoming unclean. So in the Old Testament, when does God say you have to wash only one time?

And that's before you enter the temple. So the only time that you would have to wash before the Lord is wash your hands before you go to the temple. But the Pharisees are saying, you've got to wash in the market. You've got to wash if you get in contact with the Samaritan.

You've got to wash before every meal. You've got to wash in every single situation. And you see what they're doing, they're not maximizing God's law. They're actually minimizing God's law.

That's what Jesus is going to say. And all of this comes from an oral tradition that would get written down shortly after the first century called the Halakha.

[7 : 40] And the Halakha is this group of traditions, the traditions of the elders. Verse five, the commandments of men, Jesus calls it at the end of verse seven from Isaiah 29.

And these are traditions that have been heaped on top of the actual laws. And they're traditions that have been given as ways to prevent yourself from ever becoming unclean before God.

They're ways to behave. For the Sabbath, there are 39. For the washing of hands, there are more than 20. There's all sorts of long list of these rules.

And the point is not that easy to see at first, but here's the point. In making all these extra commands to try to prevent yourself from becoming unclean, and the Pharisees have actually ruined the cleanliness laws.

Why? Because the point of the cleanliness laws was to say, over and over again, you cannot help but become unclean. You see, the Pharisees have multiplied them to try to say, I can actually prevent myself from ever becoming unclean.

[8 : 43] And the cleanliness laws were always there to say, no, you have to become unclean. Because it's just an outside symbol that's trying to tell you about an inside reality. What really defiles you?

You see, Jesus' battle with the Pharisees here is to say one thing, you miss the point. And the point is, you cannot wash yourself. You can't cleanse yourself.

The Pharisees thought they could. If they washed their hands enough, they would truly be clean. But he said, no, that's just external. You can never wash yourself. You can never really become clean. You can't make yourself clean.

Now the fact that the Pharisees did this, I think is just a slight pointer to the fact that no matter what you believe in here today, every single person here this morning, every single person throughout the world, has some sense of their uncleanness.

Now every single human being at times in their lives gets some type of sense that they're willing maybe to say, I need to be washed.

[9 : 50] I need to have my heart cleansed. We all get a sense of that. And the Bible calls that the problem of sin. All right?

So if you're a Christian, you say, I grew up in the church. I know this. Look, the Bible calls this the problem of sin. And the question of the passage is in some way, do you really believe in this problem?

Out of all the things that are going on in your life right now, in my life right now, the list of problems that you could lay out, the money problems and the relational problems and the anxiety and all of it, are you really willing to say this morning that your biggest problem is your sin?

That what really defiles you is actually something that's going on in your heart, something that's going on on the inside. This idea that every single one of us need washing, we're defiled, we're sinners, is obviously not popular in the modern world.

Not at all. I don't know if you knew that. It's not popular. And there was a French philosopher in the middle 20th century named Jean-Paul Sartre. And he wrote a number of famous books, one called *The Stranger*, a novel.

[11 : 06] But Sartre is a great illustration of this. Sartre said that sin is an illusion. So he's one of the big voices of the 20th century that helped the modern world come to terms with the fact that sin is an illusion, that guilt is just a construct.

So if there's no God, then there's no such thing as sin or guilt. Guilt, the courtroom type guilt is something that we've actually constructed from the ground up.

But you can't say that it's metaphysically or philosophically real because there's no one above you to actually be guilty before or towards. So Sartre said, of course, sin's a construct.

Sin is not real, and therefore guilt is not real. But listen to what he also writes. He wrote a really famous book called *Being and Nothingness*. And it's very philosophical, not funda-read.

But this is what he says. He says, I am haunted by nothingness. Nothingness becomes Sartre's term for what the Christian calls sin.

[12 : 05] And in one place he describes it, he says, nothingness is the sense of having fallen. And this is what he says. He says, we are perpetually haunted by nothingness.

We're continually brought face to face with the fact that we cannot realize our own ideals. And you see what he's saying. He's saying, I don't believe in sin because I don't believe in God, and therefore there's no such thing as guilt, but I am haunted by the fact that I cannot live up to the ideal that I feel in my heart.

He said, I don't believe in sin, but I know I need to be washed. That's what he said. And you know, Karl Marx a century before that, he said, I don't believe in sin.

I don't believe in God, but I know society needs to be washed. I know that society needs to be cleansed of its problems, of its guilt and shame.

And remember what he said. He said, you know, the problem is the greed of the rich. And if we could push down the greed of the rich and lift up the lower classes and actually create eventually a classless society, we could wash, we could cleanse society of all its problems.

[13 : 14] On the one hand, there's no sin, there's no guilt, there's no reality of any problem at all. It's all a construct, and yet we desperately need society to be washed.

Heather and I were watching a film, a movie a couple weeks ago called *The Triangle of Sadness*, and it won a couple of awards at the Cannes Film Festival. And it's about the Uber Rich, the .0000001%, not the 1%, but that many zeros before the 1%.

And these four or five billionaires, couples go on this cruise on a luxury yacht, and I think it's in the Mediterranean. And they, you know what they're like.

They're abusive. They treat the staff terribly. Of course, there are probably some very kind billionaires out there, but on this movie, they treat the staff terribly. One man made all of his money because he sold grenades and machine guns to everybody in all the wars.

It didn't matter what side. And then the next person became a billionaire because they bought the right amount of Bitcoin at just the right time and sold it on. Another one became a billionaire because they have hundreds of millions of social media followers, and so there are a couple that just post pictures of themselves every day.

[14 : 34] And they all became billionaires. And they're on this luxury yacht, and they treat the staff so poorly, demanding the most ridiculous things, offering the staff Rolexes to meet impossible demands, foods that aren't even on the boat that they demand, all sorts of things like that.

And then everything goes wrong and the cruise ship takes on water. The power goes out. It hits rocks and lands on a deserted island.

And there's these three or four billionaire couples and only a few other survivors. And one woman, one of the survivors, she cleaned their toilets on the ship, but she had grown up in the jungles.

And on the deserted island with no inhabitants, she knows how to make fire. She knows how to fish. She knows how to capture animals. She knows how to clean meat. She knows how to do everything.

And you know what they do? They come to her and they say, I'll give you my Rolex. I'll give you my diamonds. I'll give you everything. I'll hand over a portion of my company to you. Just teach me how to make a fire.

[15 : 38] And you know what she does? She abuses them. She enslaves them. She makes ridiculous demands of every single one of them, and she becomes the billionaire.

And that's exactly what Marx missed. You see, circumstances are not the problem. And Jesus says it very clearly at the end of the passage in verse 23.

All evil things come from within. And you see what he's saying? He's saying, it's not the things outside us that make us what we are. It's actually that the heart is defiled.

It's sin. It's what comes from the inside. Jesus gives his own example of this here in the passage. He says that this, even when we're trying our best to become clean, to make ourselves clean, this is what we actually do.

He says in verses 10 to 13 that the Pharisees had taken this command, the Fifth Commandment, honor your father and your mother. And this command required in the first century and before that, that any family take care of the elderly.

[16 : 44] So oftentimes a family might own a piece of land. They might own some crops or an extra house next to them. And if mom and dad became ill, needed help taking care of themselves, couldn't farm the land any longer, then it was your responsibility, of course, honor your father and mother to take them in, to feed them, to support them, to give them a plot of land for somebody else to work.

But the Pharisees, the tradition of the elders saying that we're washing ourselves, we're making ourselves clean. You know what they did? They said, well, you know what you can do? You can take that plot of land and you can pronounce the word Corbin.

You see that there in verse 11. And that means in Hebrew, I've given this thing to the Lord. And this is basically a deferred gift. So what you're saying there is, I'm taking this plot of land, I'm taking this house, and I'm dedicating it to ministry.

And that meant that when you died, all the money that would come from the crops, that would come from the house, would go straight to the temple, to the ministry of the Lord, to support the priest. And so what you could do is if you didn't want your mom and dad to get the house, you didn't want your mom and dad to take the crops, you could declare it dedicated to the Lord, Corbin, and it would be yours all the way to the point of your death.

And then when it died, when you died, it would go to the temple. That way nobody could touch it because it had been dedicated. And you see what Jesus is saying, you human beings, you're corrupted.

[18 : 13] And what's happening is a both end, you at the same time want your religion and you want your sin. You want to follow the rules and you want to wash yourself. You want to try everything you can to make yourself clean.

And you'll attach that to religion, but at the same time, figure out ways to hold onto your sin simultaneously. You'll figure out ways, clever ways to wash yourself, but at the same time sin in the very same moment.

That's exactly what this law was. Jesus's point, let's move on. Jesus's point is this. Do you believe that today?

That your biggest problem is your heart? That this list of sins in verse 22, 21, evil thoughts, that actually comes from within you?

Now the question is, how do you become clean? Briefly. And Jesus tells us that too. He tells us that in verse 19. In verse 19, Jesus says at the very end, Mark tells us, he declared all foods clean.

[19 : 22] Now what Mark is doing there is saying Jesus declared food to be clean, but only as a summary of the end of all the cleanliness laws.

So in that moment, Jesus, in other words, in declaring all foods are clean, you can eat pork. He's saying all the cleanliness laws are now finished. Now we have to be careful here because you might think that when he does that, he's minimizing the law.

He's saying the cleanliness laws didn't matter that much and now we can put them away, but actually what he's doing is maximizing the law. Remember the Pharisees minimize it? They think the clean, they can actually obey them when the point was exactly the opposite to show that you can't, you can never make yourself clean.

But what is Jesus doing? You know, he said, Jesus said that these laws are going to stand until every jot and tittle is completely fulfilled. Every tiny little bit of it is completely obeyed and fulfilled.

That means that he believes that when he stands right here in their presence and says, all foods are clean, the cleanliness laws are finished, that he is fulfilling the entirety of the law.

[20 : 32] And the reason he believes that is for two reasons. And the first is this, this is what he's saying. Remember the cleanliness laws that they're a sign and a symbol.

They're saying there is something wrong with your heart and the biggest issue you have is that your sin has separated you from the presence of the living God.

We have a separation problem. And the cleanliness laws were there to say to you over and over again, you cannot enter God's presence. You have a separation problem in the only way, the only way that it can be fixed.

You know, if you can't draw near to God, you have to hope that God might draw near to you. And the reason that Jesus in this moment can say the laws are finished is because he's saying, you can't come close to God, so I came.

You see, he's saying, I fulfilled it. The problem was separation, but in other words, he's saying, you know, you want to go to the temple to see God, but you're separated from God by your sin, but today the temple's come to you.

[21 : 44] I'm the temple. Jesus is saying, I'm the temple. I'm standing here right in front of you. It's no longer a separation problem. I've come to you when you couldn't come to me.

The second reason and one in the final and one commentator really helped me to see this. He pointed out that the background of what's happening here is found in the prophet Zechariah, one symbol at least you might say.

Chapter three, Zechariah chapter three, we have a vision. Zechariah sees this high priest once a year. The high priest would wash himself.

The high priest would actually go spend the night a whole week in fact away from his family and he would do that because he didn't want to become unclean in any way. So anybody that is unclean that you interact with, you become unclean.

So he would separate himself, live in his own little shack for a week. But when it came time for the Sabbath day, the day of atonement for the day before the Sabbath, the day of atonement, the high priest would come out, stand in public and he would wash himself five times.

[22 : 51] So a complete ritual washing five times. And it's because he is the only person all year, one time, one time only, that can step into the holy of holies. So he steps inside the holiest part of the temple to offer one sacrifice before the Lord that would atone for the sins of all the people.

And here in this vision, Zechariah three, the high priest has spent the night away. He's washed himself ritually five times, but we see a glimpse of heaven.

And there is the angel of the Lord and Satan. And Satan says to God, the angel of the Lord, he says, look at the high priest.

You know, he's done all your laws. He's washed himself five times. But look at what he really is. And the curtain is pulled back and what does the high priest look like?

He's covered and he's covered. The ESV says he was filthy, but the Hebrew doesn't say filthy. The Hebrew says he was covered in excrement. He was covered in dung completely from head to toe.

[23 : 59] You know, he had washed himself. He had done all the cleanliness laws and there he was. The truth was pulled back. It showed his heart and he was covered in dung. And Satan says, you see, he's guilty.

He can't come into your presence and the angel of the Lord turns and says, I'll just give him a new robe. And so in the vision, the angel of the Lord takes off the high priest's robe and he covers them in white, in a white robe.

Here we are. You know that the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, I can't prove this to you right now, but we've done it before. The angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, you know who he is?

He's the Son of God himself. And here we are in the midst of the gospels and the angel of the Lord, the messenger of the Lord, the Son of God himself has come down and what he's saying when he declares all foods clean, he says, I'm here to give you new clothes.

And Jesus Christ is saying, you can't wash yourself, but I've come to wash you. I've come to put a new robe on you.

[25 : 04] Look, there's a real danger here. Christian friends that have grown up in the church, do not let this be old news to you.

You cannot clean yourself. You cannot wash yourself. You cannot get rid of your sin. You cannot push away your defilement. Only Jesus Christ, the angel of the Lord can wash you.

He's the only one that can. And he came to give you new clothes. And so he was stripped naked.

He came to wash your sins away. And so he was bathed in the death of his own blood. He came to bring you nigh to God. We're going to sing that in a minute near to God.

And so he was ultimately separated from God. He came to take on everything we deserve at the cross so that he could wash you and make you clean from the inside out.

[26 : 02] And it's the only way. That's the uniqueness of the Christian message. In him, in his price, love and justice met. He loved you so much. And so he took on the justice you deserve in that moment.

Now let me close with this. Food cannot clean you. Washing, ritual washing cannot clean you.

The five ways, the five ways of Islam cannot clean you. And the eightfold path of the Buddha cannot cleanse you.

The 12 steps cannot ultimately deal with your greatest problem. And a classless society cannot cleanse you. And equality and achieving equality cannot cleanse you.

Human rights cannot cleanse you. Asceticism cannot clean you. Fitness cannot help you. Philanthropy cannot cleanse you. Society will not cleanse you.

[27 : 05] Religious rights and any other thing you want to attach to the list cannot help you. Not with the problem of sin. Only Jesus Christ can. Now let me tell you three freedoms that gives you and we'll finish.

First one is this. If you believe that today, you have freedom from guilt. Satan remember stood before the Lord and said, you see that man, he's the best of the land, yet he's still incredibly guilty before you.

When you trust in Jesus Christ, you need to know the very simple but majestic reality that you are truly guilt free before the Lord.

Now some of us here today may, some of us probably do, I know, struggle with guilt and shame from the things that we've done in our life.

Some of you struggle today with guilt and shame and a burden that's on your back all the time because of the current issues you have, the addictions maybe.

[28 : 13] It's either past or present. Some of you both. And you need to ask yourself this question today. If Jesus Christ's blood was sufficient for God, the Father in heaven to say to you, you are clean, you're guilt free, you are shame free.

Can you accept that? You know, is that enough for you to say the burden is gone? The guilt that I feel, the shame that I feel all the time.

If God, the Father can say the blood of Christ was enough, are you willing to say that about your own guilt and your own shame? You know, you have freedom from guilt in Jesus. Secondly, you have freedom from the commandments of men.

Let me ask you, maybe you're here today and you're struggling with these ideas. You're saying I'm not buying, I don't know if I'm sold on the concept of sin. I don't know if I'm sold on the concept of defilement and the way you're describing it.

Let me ask you this. How can you ever know, how can you ever know if your guilt feelings are real or just a product of the construct that you're living in?

[29 : 27] You know, if you buy the message of the 20th and 21st century, there is no such thing as guilt. It's a construct from the ground up. But let me ask you, every single one of us has guilt feelings.

How can you know which one of those you can trust and which one of those you can't? You know, you say, well, I don't actually know that I believe in guilt. But then you look out and you see Paul Pot, you see the gulag, and you see Hitler, and you say, but at the same time, when I look at that, I know I want to say, I'm pretty sure that's guilt.

On the one hand, you're told guilt is a construct. There's no such thing as sin. On the other hand, you know at the same time, you feel the fact that there are guilty people. And let me simply ask you, how can you know which one?

And you see what Jesus does here? He says, you can either listen to the commandments of men or the word of God. That's the distinction He makes. The commandments of men come from every culture, every construct, every tribe, every nation.

Our culture tells us this is okay. And then in 10 years, they'll tell us it's not okay. And we all know that these things flip-flop all the time. How can you ever know what actually makes you guilty?

[30 : 37] You see, you have freedom in Jesus Christ from the commandments of men because you've been gifted the word of God. How can you know unless you have a word from God, a true authority in your life to tell you this is actually what makes you guilty?

And in Jesus Christ, not only are you free from guilt, but you're free from people's opinions. You're free from culture's opinions about what's wrong and what's right and then what's right and what's wrong.

Lastly, you have freedom from guilt. You have freedom from the commandments of men. You have freedom from sin itself. Simple. Maybe the most important takeaway from this passage is simply this.

Sin defiles you. So go and sin no more. It's very easy as a Christian to live a Christian life and to miss this simple fact that Jesus wants us to go and sin no more.

Not so that you can get into his kingdom, but because you already have. And so Jesus will say a couple more times in the Gospels, you've been forgiven. Go and don't sin anymore.

[31 : 47] Sin defiles you. Sin makes you miserable. Sin makes you sad. Sin breaks everything. Sin breaks your relationships. Let me ask you this as we close. If you're a Christian this morning, are you serious about the fact that sin really does defile?

Do you want, do you say, you know, I want to go and sin no more? I want to, I want to put away my sin. But when you do sin, you have a consistent and faithful advocate before the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who stands before God the Father for you pleading with his own blood.

And so you see that Jesus's blood frees you from sin because it actually gives you the power to go and sin no more and to know that when you do sin, you're okay.

You're guilt free. Both of those things go together at the same time. Nothing can separate you from the love of God, not even your sin. And so go and sin no more.

Let's pray together. Lord we ask now that you would help us to see the emptiness in the culture's construct, the commandments and traditions of men and that we would instead find hope in the authority of the Word of God.

[33 : 11] And in the Word of God here you tell us that the blood of Jesus makes us clean. So Lord, we confess today nothing but the blood of Christ. We confess the cross.

I do pray Lord that you would help someone here today to find the power of the cross and to find the power of being what it means to be washed Lord.

So for those here that are struggling right now, you know their hearts Lord. You know the hearts of those who bear the weight of guilt in their lives. Free them.

Free them Lord by the Spirit. Show them what it means to be washed. Give them great trust in Christ. And so we ask for this for all of us Lord and we lift this prayer before you as we sing to you about just this.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.