Out of the Heart

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
February 1, 2026 – PM Sermon
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Mark 7:1-23

The poor Pharisees; they catch it again here, don't they? It would be the easiest thing in the world to make this yet another sermon that treats the Pharisees as punching bags. It would be very easy for us to set up the Pharisees for abuse, going through all the reasons they are sinful and wrong and just plain silly – that might take about 15 minutes – and then conclude the sermon with 5 minutes in which we feel good that we are not like them. But the more I've studied this passage, the more I begin to feel as though that would be unfair. The more I studied this passage, the more I began to feel as though I am a lot like the Pharisees; we are all a lot like them. How so?

Well, take those ritual washings before meals they had, the ones at issue in this passage. If we were given a chance to interview a 1st century Pharisee and ask him about these washings he would probably admit to you that, although not found in the Bible itself, all these washings were based on Leviticus 15. He might say to you: "In Leviticus 15 we are warned not to let ourselves become unholy and unclean before the Lord by touching unclean things. In the Spirit of that commandment we wash our hands and our dinner things before a meal. It is a thing that we do to stay Holy before the Lord."

We might self-righteously respond, "Ah yes, but this is a human rule, not a direct command! You shouldn't build your religion on human rules! You should build it on the Word of God!!" We might say that and feel pretty good about ourselves. But if that's all we got out of the passage, we will have all missed the point. If all we get out of this passage is: "Human tradition, bad; Word of God, good!" we have missed the deeper meaning of Jesus' teaching.

Let me just recast the passage slightly to show you why. Put the passage in a modern context and imagine that instead of the disciples missing ritual washing before their meals, imagine it was prayer. Here, beginning at verse 1, is Mark 7 brought up to date: "Some Christian Reformed people visiting from Grand Rapids gathered around him. They noticed that his disciples never prayed before they ate. They never gave thanks over the food! (Now the Christian Reformed people do not eat unless they have thoroughly prayed over their food, thus observing the tradition of their parents. They also pray over all sorts of other things such as homes, churches, schools and even committee meetings.) So, the Christian Reformed people asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples pray before they eat? Why do they eat with ungrateful irreverence?" Jesus turned to them and said "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites. As it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

That makes it sound different, doesn't it? And it's a fair comparison. Our mealtime prayers are the rough equivalent of the Pharisees washings. Prayer before meals is not a Biblical command. There is no place in Scripture that calls us to pray before eating. It's a human tradition – a popular one, a venerated one – I would say it's a good human tradition! I think praying before meals is a wonderful tradition and it should be maintained. It should be taught to our children and our children's children. But it's a human tradition all the same! Before we look down our noses at these tradition loving Pharisees, we should realize that we have the same sorts of practices in our faith.

You see the real problem in this passage isn't the existence of human tradition, a human tradition in and of itself isn't a bad thing, the real problem in this passage is the way this tradition was being used. Jesus' real concern for the Pharisees (and his real concern with us) isn't with the tradition, Jesus is concerned with their hearts. "You worship me, but your heart is far from me,"

The problem with the Pharisees is not that they ritually wash their hands before every meal; Jesus' problem with these Pharisees is that they do it without any heart! They are just going through the motions. They are just sleepwalking through this stuff. They are cultural believers. Their faith has been replaced by a

bunch of rituals and laws and rules and at the center of this elaborate show there is no passionate love for God. It's hollow. The Pharisees start this discussion with indignant questions about mealtime devotions; Jesus finishes the discussion by talking about the heart of the matter.

Because it's really all about the heart, isn't it? The heart is the thing that really matters. These days when young people are asked about what kind of person they'd like to have for a spouse they often say they'd like a 'soul mate'. It sounds a little flaky, but it reflects a desire to connect with someone else's heart – not just go through the motions with them, not just eat dinner and pay bills and go on vacations and make a home with another person – they want to connect with someone's heart. The heart is the thing. The mystery of faith, the mystery of ourselves, the mystery of our actions and our inactions – they are all hidden in that labyrinth we call the human heart.

And what a Labyrinth it is! Remember back to the Iraq war. After we invaded and toppled Sadaam Hussein, we set about trying to re-establish the country, trying to rebuild it. It was a hard job and I'm not sure we ultimately succeeded. Do you remember what we kept talking about as we did that work? "We need to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people!" "If we want to change this country, we have to win their hearts and minds." It wasn't enough to have military control over the country. We could have absolute military control over every street and every neighborhood, but if we didn't change hearts, it would make no difference. Winning Iraqi hearts turned out to be perilously hard. American armies breached the military defenses of Iraq in a little over a week. The defenses of the human heart have proved much more formidable.

Of all life's mysteries, is there any deeper mystery than the human heart? Is there anything more guarded than the human heart? On the one hand it can be a fortress. You have a family member whose heart seems to have gone dark, they are deeply discouraged, they are angry and bitter all the time; this person who used to laugh with you and play with you and stand beside you, all of a sudden, it's like they've collapsed into themselves. Joy is gone from their lives. And you, you just want to help them. You want to see them smile again, you want to see them laugh, you want the light to return to their eyes. You want to change their heart. And so you try whatever you can, whatever you can think of to restore this person; you try to spelunk down into the dark cave of their unhappiness so that you can light some small fire of joy there. But nothing works. You can't find the entrance to that cave. It has collapsed. It's been bricked up. Sometimes the heart is an impenetrable fortress.

On the other hand, is there anything more vulnerable than the human heart? There are times when the heart is the furthest thing from hard, sometimes it seems as fragile as a flower petal. You meet someone and your heart suddenly catches fire, and you fall hopelessly in love. There is no defense for it; your heart is weak and wide open. Or a child on the playground gets a nasty remark from a classmate and the remark cuts him right to the heart. He is devastated and his social confidence falls apart. In an instant that one-word cracks that child's heart wide open and something awful is placed at the center of his life. I have a friend who, in first grade, was told that he sounded funny when he was singing. He never sang again until he finished high school. Strange, isn't it? How can anything be so hard and so soft at the same time?

Or so good and so bad. People can be so wonderful. Really wonderful. Disasters happen and there are outpourings of heartfelt sympathy and care that really astonish, that move you to tears. We know that our hearts are capable of really beautiful things. Out of the heart comes all sorts of goodness, charity, kindness, generosity and love. You see it every day.

But in the same heart we carry terrible stuff too: selfishness and greed and lust and spite; things too terrible to mention. We know that we are capable of thinking things, doing things and saying things that are truly awful. In moments of passion, we burst out and then later we think, "How could I have said that? How could I have done that? Who am I?" We do and say things that make us strangers to ourselves. "Out of the heart comes adultery, greed, deceit, envy, pride. All these evil things come from within," says Jesus.

Our heart. It's so important. It is the center of who we are. It is so beautiful and so messy. It is the place where our pride and our shame, our courage and our fear, our joy and our sorrow all live, jumbled together.

But mess or no, it is also a place that Jesus loves. And it is the place that Jesus wants. It is the place he wants to fill and bless and renovate. Jesus wants to be Lord of that beautiful mess. Someone once asked Jesus to sum up the law and the first thing he said was, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart." It sounds so basic, but it is the hardest, most important thing. Jesus wants our hearts. He wants to get in there and renovate our loves.

This is one of the reasons I love working in the church. This is one of the reasons I think what we do here on Sunday morning and what we do during the week is of critical importance. You keep hearing dire predictions about the future of the church and of the Christian faith. You keep hearing that we will become irrelevant. But I really don't worry too much about that because we deal with the most important thing in people's lives. We deal with the heart.

And there aren't many places that address matters of the heart anymore. Technologically speaking our society is advancing on just about every front. We've invented AI that can give us information right at our fingertips. We have diets to control our cholesterol and lotions to keep our skin fresh. You walk into a hospital you will see every kind of contraption imaginable to care for our physical bodies. People are experts at keeping their lawns green and keeping bugs off their begonias. In all sorts of disciplines, we keep leaping ahead in knowledge.

But when it comes to the heart, outside of the church, outside of the gospel, where's the technology? Where's the wisdom!? As a society we are getting worse at talking about matters of heart and soul. David Brooks spoke at Calvin's January series. He talked about how to restore our cultural fabric, and he talked about how the modern university has become great at research and information, but they've given up on the formation of the soul. They don't speak to questions of meaning and purpose. They don't speak to the heart. He teaches a class at Yale and he said he tells his students, "You all are great people. You're really smart, but you are morally inarticulate. You don't know how to talk about matters of heart, matters of soul." He cited a statistic: 57% of modern college students say they have no real sense of ultimate meaning or purpose that they can point to at the center of their life. People's hearts are adrift.

But here, in this community, we speak to the heart. Here in this Word and at that table and in this community, we have what every human heart is looking for. We have Jesus – the way, the truth and the life. It's weird, in some sense the church has never had less power in our culture, and yet never has our culture had more need of the life-giving word that we are offering here.

So, how is your heart? Is it full of faith, or is it a little empty and cold? Are you passionately engaged, or are you just going through the motions? Is it cheerful and well lit, or is it clouded and dark? Is it clean and tidy or is it a bit of a mess? Whatever shape it's in, bring it to Jesus. He wants all of it, and he knows what to do with it. He will shape it with his Holy Spirit. He will water it with his Word. He will feed it with his holy food of his table. He will shape it by placing you in a family of fellowship and support. Open your heart wide to him, open your heart wide to his people, be vulnerable, and he will slowly shape your heart into something holy, radiant and strong.