

SERMON TITLE: “Jesus 101: Jesus & Spiritual Health”
SERMON TEXT: Mark 7:1-23
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 1, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

There’s a certain wisdom that can come from age. When John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was just a few months shy of his 86th birthday, he asked a crowd of Irish Methodists why God had created human beings. Being a preacher, Wesley then proceeded to answer his own question. The reason God created human beings, said Wesley, was that they would “be happy in God.” Wesley described that happiness as gratitude to our Creator and benevolence to our fellow human beings.*

As you may know, when Wesley was much younger, he went through a dark time when he would have described himself as anything but happy. Despite his valiant efforts to fulfill God’s expectations, Wesley felt like a miserable failure. But eventually, he heard the message of love and grace through Jesus Christ. Through that heart-warming experience, Wesley discovered happiness in God. And then he spent the rest of his long life teaching people how they too could experience that kind of spiritual health.

I’m telling you this story because it fits well with our “Jesus 101” series. During this back-to-school season, I’ve been preaching a series on the basics of who Jesus was and what that means for our Christian faith. We’ve been progressing through the early chapters of Mark, discussing Jesus & the Gospel, Jesus & Vocation, Jesus & Healing, Jesus & the Law, Jesus & Water, and Jesus & the Multitudes. Today, using Mark 7 as our text, we’re going to talk about Jesus & Spiritual Health.

1—TO WASH OR NOT TO WASH?

In Mark 7, the first question that arises is to wash or not to wash. The Pharisees and scribes obviously thought that their ritual handwashing was a highly spiritual act, and they didn’t

understand why some of Jesus' disciples didn't observe this spiritual practice before eating. This thorough washing of hands was a tradition passed down from the Jewish elders, so it seemed to the Pharisees and scribes to be a required aspect of their Jewish faith. How could a person be spiritually healthy and not do this? After all, isn't cleanliness next to godliness?

If you're like me, your immediate impulse might be to side with the Pharisees and scribes on this matter. What parents haven't told their kids a million times to wash their hands before they eat? We've certainly all seen the signs posted in restrooms reminding restaurant workers and the public to wash our hands thoroughly after doing our business. Today we know that all kinds of bacteria, viruses, and diseases are spread by dirty hands. So, to us, it's a little surprising that Jesus the healer didn't jump on the sanitation band wagon with these Jewish leaders. A lot of sick people could be healed by practicing better hygiene. In verses 14-19, Jesus said that what goes into the body isn't the defiling factor, but rather what comes out of the body. Well, as one who has experienced the Nicaraguan and Colombian versions of Montezuma's revenge, I can attest that cleaner hands, cleaner pots and pans, cleaner food, and especially cleaner water produce a lot less defilement and a whole lot more physical health.

So, being a person who values cleanliness, I take some comfort in a close reading of verse two. There, we notice that *some of Jesus' disciples* were eating with unwashed hands. The verse doesn't say *all of them* were doing it. So, we can assume that Jesus himself and *some* others of his disciples probably did practice the Jewish ritual of washing before they ate. Phew! Thank goodness! Handwashing might still be OK!

2—QUESTION OUR HUMAN TRADITIONS

But if cleanliness is a good thing, then why didn't Jesus just agree with the Pharisees and scribes and tell his unclean disciples to go wash up? Maybe because the Pharisees and scribes had taken their washing to an extreme in which they valued the ritual more than the purpose.

There's a nuance here. They weren't washing their hands to be physically healthy; they were washing because they thought the key to spiritual health was following certain rules set in place by their elders.

That reminds me of the story of the Easter ham. The story goes that there was a family tradition in which, generation after generation, the women of the family prepared the Easter ham exactly the same way. Whatever size ham they brought home from the store, they cut an inch off the length before putting the ham in the pan to bake. Great Grandma did it, Grandma did it, Mom did it, and finally the daughter did it. But one Easter, the daughter invited her great grandmother to come into the kitchen and chat while she was preparing the ham for the oven. When the great grandmother saw what her great granddaughter was doing, she asked, "Honey, why are you cutting off the end of the ham?"

Puzzled, the great granddaughter protested, "You should know that, Great Grandma. It's our family tradition, so we'll have the perfect Easter ham, just like you always prepared. You taught Grandma to do that, and she taught Mom, and Mom taught me. All these years, we've been following *your* Easter ham tradition."

"Oh no!" exclaimed the great grandmother. I never meant for that to be a tradition! I only cut an inch off the ham because my pan was too small!"

While following a tradition may sometimes be good practice, other times it may no longer be necessary, and sometimes those traditions may actually cause harm. Think, for example, of all the energy wasted on worrying about how people should dress when they come to worship, or how they should wear their hair. More important than blind obedience and repetition is knowing why the practice got started. If we know the purpose of a tradition, then we aren't following the rules mindlessly just for the sake of the rules. Then we can decide if the tradition is still meaningful, if it

still serves a good purpose, or if there might be a better way to accomplish our goals in a new time and place.

Missionaries often have had to think about tradition this way. Just because a spiritual practice helped people draw close to God in Europe or North America wasn't any guarantee that the same ritual would be meaningful in Africa, South America, or Asia. We also have to consider this truth between generations. For example, just because a certain type of music has been a rich part of Christian worship for several hundred years doesn't mean that worship always has to include that same type of music. Maybe, for a younger generation, new sounds and worship styles would convey the gospel in a more effective and heart-felt manner. Jesus obviously believed that there are some basic and important commandments. But Jesus also teaches us that, to have spiritual health, we must be willing to question our human traditions.

3—CLEAN UP OUR HEARTS

Another point Jesus makes in this passage is that, to have spiritual health, we must clean up our hearts. As bad as sickness of the digestive track might be, sickness of the soul is a lot worse. While washing our hands can be helpful to our physical health, the focus of our hearts is what determines our spiritual well-being.

During and after his encounter with the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus named a number of symptoms of spiritual sickness. In verse six, quoting from the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus made it clear that disease of the spirit occurs when the people honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from God's will and purpose. In verses 21-23, Jesus spoke about the evil intentions of the heart which, in turn, produce sexual sins, thefts, murders, unfaithfulness to spouse, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness. Those symptoms of spiritual illness hurt the individual, and they also wound and destroy other people. Jesus called the

Jewish leaders “hypocrites” because, even as they so piously washed their hands and taught others to do likewise, their hearts were still contaminated with sin.

According to Jesus, it wasn’t washing hands in traditional rituals that was going to heal the people of their spiritual sickness. What they needed was a heartfelt way to connect with God, so their worship wouldn’t be in vain, so their hearts wouldn’t be far away from God, so they wouldn’t disrespect their fathers and mothers or have evil intentions toward others. Essentially, Jesus was saying that whether we practice traditional rituals or brand-new ones, what’s important is that our hearts are connecting with God in a way that’s meaningful and alive. That’s when we’ll be clean not only on the outside, but also on the inside. That’s when we’ll be germ-free not only on our hands but also in our hearts. When our hearts are purified by a direct, personal, and powerful relationship with God, that’s when we’ll have spiritual health.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 51 is a prayer of repentance that asks, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me . . . Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” That sounds like the happiness that John Wesley found when he felt his heart strangely warmed by the grace of Jesus Christ. That remedy of the heart sounds to me like the message of Jesus and spiritual health.

*<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/cambridge-companion-to-john-wesley/happiness-holiness-and-the-moral-life-in-john-wesley/37B8C1045DCE72DCAD3C648FEFB2CC19>