

OF THE WORLD OR IN IT?

MARK 6:53 – 7:8, 14-16

Why all this fuss about hand washing? I grew up in a family of five boys, and hand washing was certainly not one of our highest priorities. In fact, I didn't learn what the "five second rule" was until I was in college. But then I married Debbie, and she came from a family of all girls. Suddenly our two worlds collided, and I faced some serious retraining until I mended my ways!

Here in our text, a hand washing confrontation of a different kind was taking place. The two groups were the Pharisees and teachers of the law versus Jesus and His disciples. But to fully appreciate the dispute, we need to first understand something important about the Pharisees:

I. THE PHARISEES PRACTICED AN ETHIC OF AVOIDANCE.

The Pharisees defined a disciple by what he or she avoided. They said, "Here's what a disciple is not..." For example, "A disciple does not violate the Sabbath by working on it." And so they developed a whole set of laws or what Jesus called "traditions of men" to make sure that they wouldn't violate the Sabbath by working on it.

- It was forbidden to look in a mirror on the Sabbath, because if you saw a gray hair, you might be tempted to pull it out, which would be considered "working."
- You couldn't wear any false teeth on the Sabbath, because if they fell out, you would have to pick them up, and that would also be considered "working."
- You could spit on the Sabbath, but you had to be careful where...Your spit was not allowed to land on dirt, because if you scuffed it with your sandal, you would be cultivating the soil and thereby performing "work."

Do you see where this is heading? A disciple becomes someone who:

- Does not look in the mirror on the Sabbath
- Does not wear false teeth on the Sabbath
- Does not spit in the dirt on the Sabbath

The Pharisees had plenty of laws about hand washing as well. You see, for the Pharisees, hand washing was a sign of purity that allowed a person to come close to God. And so a whole set of hand washing rituals was developed in order to protect the average person from becoming impure or defiled.

Where did all these laws begin? If we go back to the Book of Exodus, we find that all priests were required to perform ritual hand washings as part of their priestly duties:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a bronze basin, with its bronze stand, for washing. Place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and put water in it. Aaron and his sons [the priests] are to wash their hands and feet with water from it. Whenever they enter the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water so that they will not die. Also, when they approach the altar to minister by presenting an offering made to the LORD by fire, they shall wash their hands and feet so that they will not die. This is to be a lasting ordinance for Aaron and his descendants (priests) for the generations to come." (Exodus 30:17-21)

But by 200 B.C., the Pharisees had decided that it wasn't enough for just the priests to do these ritual hand washings. They created their own tradition that required all religious Jews to follow the practice as well. Because the last thing you wanted to do was to become impure or defiled. In fact centuries later, when the Mishnah – the collection of Jewish oral laws – was compiled, the biggest portion dealt with this topic of ceremonial hand washing. 186 pages!

Look at v.3 of our text:

The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they [first] wash.

If you have your own Bible with you, I'd encourage you to underline the word "marketplace" in v.4. Remember, the Pharisees defined a disciple by what he or she avoids. And the Pharisees saw going into the marketplace as entering into a world that was dirty and would defile them if they touched anything.

Marketplaces by definition are crowded – with all kinds of people, some desirable, some not so desirable – and you're being pushed up against all types: beggars, sick people, people who are disabled. And everyone in the marketplace has different standards about cleanliness. So by the time you're done handling the unwashed food and your money and everything else, you're dirty.

Now if you're a Pharisee, then being physically dirty leads to being spiritually unclean as well. But you can't go to the marketplace without touching things, right? So if you're a good Pharisee, your strategy is what? AVOIDANCE.

The goal is to enter and exit the marketplace with the least amount of involvement or touching, and then you return home and clean up, and then you take the extra step of doing the ritual washing – to make sure that you're not impure or defiled.

This involved pouring a little water over their hands, elevating them slightly so the water would run down the wrist, and then rubbing your hands together. Next, you would lower your hands and rinse them, allowing the water to run off your fingertips. And if you were returning from the marketplace, where the risk of defilement was high, you could go to even greater extremes, taking a special bath. After all, clean hands mean a clean heart, right?

So our text from Mark 7 finds the Pharisees taking note of the fact that some of Jesus' disciples were eating with "unclean" hands – what Mark describes as "ceremonially unclean hands." We're not talking about bad hygiene on the part of the disciples, like my brothers and I had as kids. We're talking about skipping the ceremonial washing. And so the Pharisees figure that Jesus, as their teacher, needs to be held responsible for this violation of purity. In v.5 we read:

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"

And Jesus replies with a stinging indictment of their hand washing rituals. Look at v.6.

He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

*'These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught by men.'*

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." And He said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"

And then in v.15, He says what some have called the most revolutionary passage of the New Testament:

"Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'"

Jesus is saying that impurity or defilement only comes from within, from an individual's heart, and not from contact with anything external.

- Purity cannot happen from the outside.
- Purity originates on the inside.

Think about it. There are over 800 verses in the Bible that speak about our hearts. That's because the condition of our hearts is important to God! The best known reference is found in Proverbs:

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. (Proverbs 4:23)

Mark Buchanan, in his book, *Your God Is Too Safe*, tells of a time when he was speaking to a group of young people and asked them to define what a Christian is. Here's what they said:

A Christian is someone who:

- Doesn't smoke
- Doesn't drink or do drugs
- Doesn't have sex until marriage
- Doesn't use bad language
- Doesn't listen to music with inappropriate lyrics
- Doesn't see bad movies

Buchanan's response was to say it's tragic that we instinctively define Christians by what they are NOT...or by what they AVOID. "It's like being asked to draw a picture of someone and instead, drawing everything around the person and leaving the portrait blank. In saying what disciples are NOT, we merely sketch the air around them."

Jesus never did that. In Matthew 25 at the great Judgment, Jesus divides the sheep from the goats, the saved from the lost. And how does He tell them apart? On what basis does He separate His true disciples from the false ones?

Does He say, my true disciples are those who "didn't drink and didn't chew and didn't go with girls who do?" No, He sure doesn't. Practicing an ethic of avoidance and self-protection will result in harsh judgment when Jesus returns.

And that's because:

II. JESUS PRACTICED AN ETHIC OF INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT.

He says, "You are my disciple if:

- I came to you naked and you clothed me
- I came to you hungry and you fed me
- I was in prison and you visited me"

Look at v. 56 of our text.

And wherever He went – into villages, towns or countryside – they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged Him to let them touch even the edge of His cloak, and all who touched Him were healed.

There's that word "marketplace" again. I'd encourage you to underline it and observe what Jesus does in the marketplace as opposed to what the Pharisees do there.

Because in contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus deliberately went into the marketplace to involve Himself with sinners.

- To touch them
- To be touched BY them
- To rescue them
- To heal them
- To forgive them
- To restore them

The Pharisees asked themselves,

"How can I keep myself from getting dirty?"

Jesus asked "How can I engage with sinners and make them clean? How can I bring the Kingdom of God to bear on this person's life?"

Do you see the difference between what Jesus does in the marketplace and what the Pharisees do?

You know, Jesus was frequently accused of making friends with the wrong kinds of people: the outcasts, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the working class like the

fishermen, even the demon-possessed. He asked, "How can I cast out evil and clean up the place where it lived?"

By contrast, the Pharisees asked, "How can I prevent getting close to evil? How can I guard my reputation?"

Jesus wants to heal the sick. He reaches for the hand of the person warm with a fever and he holds the cold hand of the person awaiting death.

He grabs the diseased hand of the leper and allows the hand of the woman with the bleeding disorder to reach out and touch Him.

The Pharisees, however, want to avoid the sick, and most importantly, they don't want to get sick themselves.

Yes, the ethic of Jesus was one of active involvement.

But then wasn't that the whole purpose of His incarnation? His coming to earth to be born as a human being? Each Christmas we celebrate His coming to earth as Emmanuel, "God with us."

John 1:14 says:

The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us.

I like the way that verse is translated in Eugene Petersen's version The Message:

The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.

Do you remember how Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, and then asked "Who was a neighbor to the man?" And the "bad guys" in the story are the Jewish priest and the Levite, who avoided their fellow Jew; they wouldn't even cross the street to get close to him.

But the hero of the story is a Samaritan – a man from another tribe, a man practicing a different religion – who was considered an enemy by Jews. The reason that he is cast as the hero of the parable is because, instead of looking at the man in the ditch who had been beaten and saying "I'm not THAT," his first response was one of compassion and involvement.

He looked past the tribal differences and the religious differences and viewed him as a fellow human being needing help.

III. AS DISCIPLES OF CHRIST, WE ARE CALLED TO LIVE AN ETHIC OF INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE WORLD

To be a disciple of Christ requires a complete change of ethics. You and I are called to enter the marketplace LOOKING for ways to bring God's kingdom, God's light, and God's healing into it. You and I are called to ask ourselves, "How can I bring the salt and light of God's truth to bear on this situation? This life? This place? How can I bring a Christ-like presence to this brokenness I see?"

Where is the marketplace for you and me in 2011? Anyplace where we find the brokenness of sin. If we look to Matthew 25, it's anywhere that we find the poor, the hungry, the lonely, the sick, those in bondage, those who are outcasts, the orphaned, the widowed, those caught up in the bondage of sin.

Let me say it again: To be a disciple of Christ requires a complete change of ethics. Yes, we've all lived like the Pharisees, caring about self-protection and avoiding those who are needy and seedy in their sinfulness. But Jesus said to His disciples, *"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."* (John 20:21)

Jesus is calling you and me to an ethic that sends us out into the world, out into the marketplace so to speak, going to those to whom Jesus went. He's calling you and me to an ethic of involvement and engagement with the world – in all its brokenness, sinfulness, and ugliness.

In his book, *Outlive Your Life*, Max Lucado has a chapter called "Stand Up for the Have Nots." He writes that in today's world, many of those Jesus references as the "least of these" are those who live on a dollar a day in developing countries. He explains that, "in the game of life, many of us who cross home plate do so because we were born on third base. But others aren't even on a team." It takes them a year to earn what we would spend on a nice sport coat or dress. Why?

Singer Bono from the music group U2 says it's because they're "an accident of latitude." In other words, they were simply born in the wrong place at the wrong time. "A latitude that has no unemployment insurance, no clean water, no Social Security, no vaccinations, no paved roads. They are not poor because they are lazy. They're poor because parasites weaken their bodies, or they spend six hours a day collecting water, or because AIDS took one of their parents, or rebel armies ravaged their farms."

I think of some of the people that my daughter Claire visited in the slums of Kibera in Nairobi a few weeks ago. People who have lost their land or their health or their parents or their ox. When you only earn a dollar a day, there is no cushion to meet the challenges of life's surprises. But as you get to know them and learn their story, you begin to realize that we share much in common.

- Faithful to our spouse
- Respected by the neighbors
- Committed no crimes
- Physically able
- Willing to work
- Trained to do a job
- Love for family
- Sober and drug-free

But somehow by God's providence they were born in the wrong latitude.

Here's today's "marketplace" for you and me...

I know you've read or heard the headlines about the worst famine in 60 years that has hit East Africa, especially Somalia. The people have been forced to leave home and go to neighboring countries or else die. A refugee camp in Kenya designed to hold 70,000 refugees currently has over 400,000 and an average of 1600 new ones arrive daily.

- They're not white
- They're sick and filthy and malnourished
- Some of them are Christians, some of them are not

But they need to be helped in the name of Christ. You can go to World Relief's website at www.worldrelief.org to learn more on how you can help.

The church that is spearheading the operation for World Relief is one of our newest Love INC (Love In the Name of Christ) churches in Nairobi. Pastor Ambrose was here last year to learn about Love INC and visit several of the Love INC affiliates. Now he's on the national advisory board for Love INC Kenya. He's worthy of our trust.

More on that next week...

Where's our marketplace today?

Next week we'll be hosting Compassion International, an organization that provides us the opportunity to sponsor a child in a developing country and write letters of encouragement and receive letters back as they grow up with our additional support. Next Sunda you'll be able to see their pictures and read their profiles and come along side one in a very tangible way. Some of our Cornerstone members have even traveled to the country where their sponsored child lives in order to meet them face to face.

Coming closer to home, there's a "marketplace" right here in Livingston County. We'll be visiting 50 migrant worker families the evening of August 31st who live and work at Buurma Farms.

Our goal?

- To meet them. Get to know them a bit.

- Distribute laundry detergent and toilet paper and sun screen to them, to make their six months here in Michigan a little bit easier.
- Maybe look into conducting a vacation Bible school in Spanish for them next summer.
- Simply share the grace that God has shown to us with them in some small way.

Another marketplace is Military Avenue EPC – our sister church in Detroit. Thank you to all of you who helped with their vacation Bible School a few weeks ago! I’m sure it was a rewarding cross cultural experience for each of you. If you weren’t able to attend, maybe you could consider joining our group that goes down on Monday evenings to tutor kids at Military Avenue.

You can head to Casa Bernabé – an orphanage that Cornerstone supports in Guatemala – by joining our mission trip that takes place over Christmas break. Here’s a picture of Manuel one of the house parents at the orphanage. In his younger years, Manuel played soccer for Guatemala’s national team and was offered a position of a lifetime as its coach. But he turned it down, because he couldn’t avoid the needs of the 140 orphans at Casa Bernabé, and he’s been there for decades. Living out an ethic of involvement and engagement with those who are “the least of these.”

I could go on and on with opportunities for you to live out an ethic of involvement like Jesus:

- MOPS – the women of our community need to learn about Jesus and God’s design for the family
- Serve on a MISSION TRIP to Guatemala or Haiti or Siberia with our missionaries
- Why not help cook dinner on a Sunday afternoon here at Cornerstone for “FISH AND LOAVES”? We provide a free supper for anyone in the county and serve 60-80 people each time.
- Join our FURNITURE MINISTRY and help hand out furniture to those in need on Saturday mornings. The warehouse is only 5 minutes from here.
- Volunteer with LOVE INC.
- Become a STEPHEN MINISTER and encourage someone in need by listening and caring.

Four years ago the Washington Post ran a story on a young musician who showed up one morning at a Washington, D.C. subway station and began to play his violin. He wore blue jeans, a T-shirt, and a baseball cap. As street musicians often do, he left his violin case open and tossed in a few dollars and some change as seed money, and he began to play.

It was the morning rush hour, and the violinist played for 43 minutes, playing six classical pieces. It was a deliberate experiment. During that time period, 1,097 people passed by. Only seven stopped for more than a minute. They were all children, whose parents were nagging them to move on because they were late. The violinist collected a total of \$32.17 for his effort.

Who was the violinist? Joshua Bell. Just before his subway experiment, he had played at Boston's Symphony Hall, earning \$1,000 per minute for his concert. But not in the subway station.

How come?

- It wasn't the fault of the instrument. He played a Stradavarius violin built in the 1700's that he had bought for 3.5 million dollars!
- It wasn't the fault of the music. He played some of the best classical pieces ever composed for violin.
- It certainly wasn't the fault of the artist. Joshua Bell is one of the world's best violinists.

But hardly anyone noticed. It was a work day and people were trying to catch the subway, perhaps buy a newspaper or a lottery ticket. *Who had time to notice such musical perfection, such beauty in the midst of the rush hour?*

Most of us will one day realize that there was much that *we* did not notice either during our earthly life. Once Christ returns and we're spending eternity with Him, we'll look back on our days on earth – with all their busyness – and understand:

- That was Jesus in the news report about the famine

- That was Jesus in the worn out clothes standing at the freeway exit
- That was Jesus in the cardboard shack
- That was Jesus at Community Connect or the REACH Shelter or Cornerstone Thanksgiving Dinner
- The person needing my help was Jesus.

There are many valid reasons to help people in need. But for a disciple of Jesus Christ, there's no better reason than this:

When we love those in need, we are loving Jesus.

He said, *"Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."*

Jesus said, *"As the Father has sent me, I'm sending you."*

Go into the marketplace: your neighborhood, your schools, the prison, the hospitals, the food banks, Love INC, whatever. But let me warn you. Don't spend your heart's energy like a Pharisee – looking to enter and exit with the least involvement, touching, or engagement. *If you live an ethic of avoidance, then in the end, the one you'll avoid is Jesus Himself.*

Instead, go out looking for ways to bring God's healing and light and love and Kingdom into this broken world. Your purity comes from Christ entering your heart, washing away your sins, and making you a new creation!

Go share it with those in need.

You'll meet Jesus Christ, I promise you.