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in the Season after Pentecost

Believers Deal with the Law of God

Planted deep in the consciousness of every human creature is the desire to be right with God, to live life and end life on God's good side. The creature's challenge is to find a way to get right with God. What the voice inside us proposes is that we do our best, that we live as good a life as we can. In the Gospel for today, Jesus identifies the futility of this effort: Obeying the rules won't ever gain us a place on God's good side. The Bible shows us that the way to be right with God comes only through faith in Jesus.

First Reading

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Be careful not to forget what you have seen.

Second Reading

Romans 9:30-10:4

Christ is the culmination of the law.

Gospel

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Impurity comes from the heart.

Sermon

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Introduction – So what do you do with the drunks? They blow their paychecks, they beat their wives, they misuse their children, and they ruin their health. The problem is: How do you fix it? Way back in the 1800s, some people were convinced they had the solution: Make drinking illegal—and the American temperance movement was born. It started small with church members in the lead. But the movement grew. Cities and then states banned selling alcohol and serving it in bars and restaurants. The Lutherans and Catholics were appalled by this, but there were enough Baptists and Methodists to make it work. And so in 1919, 37 states ratified the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution which banned the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages. On January 17, 1920, America went dry. We call it Prohibition.

Giving up liquor was good for a lot of people, but Prohibition was an absolute failure. Drinkers kept on drinking. They drank in speakeasies and living rooms. There's a story that German Lutherans in Frankenmuth, Michigan, brewed their beer in the pastor's basement. Bootleg liquor crossed over from Canada where they put such awful concoctions in bottles that it poisoned people. Prohibition spawned a crime wave that the government couldn't control—and often the local police were as crooked as the gangsters. By 1933 Americans had enough. They repealed the Eighteenth Amendment and Prohibition was over.

Prohibition raised a question we America are still struggling with: Can laws control morality? We outlaw drugs and fill our prisons. We outlaw guns and gang killings soar. Those are serious issues and we have to deal with them. But politics has no place in a Lutheran pulpit.

But here's the question: How does the law control our morality? What is the purpose of God's law in our lives? How does the law of God work with us? How does it affect our hearts or our faith? I'm raising this issue this morning because Jesus raised it in the Gospel for today from Mark chapter 7. There are two episodes here: a confrontation with church experts and an explanation to his followers. We're going to think about both this morning. Here's the truth we want to remember:

God's Law Has a Purpose with Our Hearts

The law cannot make our hearts pure

The law identifies our impure hearts

2. If we're going to understand this episode we're going to have to understand how the Bible defines the word "law." The first definition is the moral law. The moral law is God's unchanging will for all people. This is the law God created in Adam and Eve and this law remains in everyone's conscience—although it's pretty hazy in most places. Jesus summarized the moral law when he said **Love God and love your neighbor**. You and I learned the moral law from the Ten Commandments. But the Bible also uses the word law to describe the law of Moses. These were laws God gave to the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai after they left Egypt. Some of the laws guided the ceremonies of the temple. The temple sacrifices meant to prepare the Israelites for the Jesus' eventual sacrifice on the cross. The law of Moses also included laws that guided civil affairs and God used those laws to bring stability to the nation so that Jesus would have a national home when he came to earth. The laws of Moses were intended only for the nation of Israel. Then there were the oral laws or the **traditions of the elders**. These laws didn't come from God but from the religious experts who used them to preserve and protect all the other laws. So now the story.

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law (those experts) **who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. 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 defiled hands?"** They weren't accusing the disciples of breaking the moral law or the law of Moses; neither of those laws said anything about washing your hands before eating. Their complaint came from the tradition of the elders which insisted that people who failed to wash their hands before they ate were impure and unclean and could not approach a holy God who demanded purity. Sounds silly to us, but they took this purity thing pretty seriously. Only the pure in heart, they insisted, can approach God.

Jesus let them have it. **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 merely human rules." You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.** Here was Jesus' point: You make a big deal about honoring God, but you don't have a clue what God is telling you. You completely ignore that the Moral Law and the Mosaic law are all about love, love for God, love for neighbor, and love for the coming Savior. All you think about is these silly rules that you lay on people's backs and then tell them that if they obey these rules they will be pure in God's sight—and if they don't they will be impure in God's sight. Ridiculous! No law can make a person pure, especially not these laws.

Thank God we don't have to deal with the traditions of the elders anymore—although maybe we do more often than we think. The Bible never talks about eating meat on Fridays or giving something up during Lent, but the Roman Church has insisted on those rules for centuries. The Bible doesn't forbid the use of alcohol, but the Baptists do. It's not so long ago that Lutherans had rules about life insurance, card playing and dancing; I can remember when the preacher always left the wedding reception when the band started to play. These people make rules about Bible translations and guitars in worship. Everybody has a right to a personal opinion, but we can't make rules when God's law doesn't make them. And those rules become really dangerous if we start to think that observing them gets us a little closer to God, that our hearts are a little more pure than the heart of someone who doesn't obey them. The law of God has a purpose with our hearts, but it cannot make our hearts pure. The law might control my actions—think of Prohibition—but it can't change my heart.

The debate with the Jews went on for a while, but it was time for Jesus to explain. **Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."** Not washing your hands before you eat is probably a bad habit, but it doesn't make you impure to God. The alcohol you put in your mouth isn't the problem; the problem is the personal decision to put more and more alcohol into your mouth. The money in your wallet isn't the problem; the problem is your inclination to spend it all. The problem with impurity before God is not exterior, but interior. Jesus said: **For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a**

person. Social commentators try to their best to excuse national problems by pointing to environment and circumstances, but the environment and circumstances are on the outside and sin is on the inside. God knew this from the start. He said, **Every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.** David admitted this: **Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.** You and I have to face up to this. Jesus came to forgive our sins, but our sins don't go away. That nasty sinful nature still lives in us and lurks in us and listens to voice of Satan and society and it will lead us away from God if we let it which means that the threat of death looms over us. We can study the law of God till we turn blue in the face and we can turn somersaults to obey it, but the law of God will not make our hearts pure in God sight.

So what is the purpose of God's law with our hearts? Jesus didn't address that question in today's Gospel but the Bible tells us. The law of Moses and the Old Testament traditions don't apply to us. The moral law does apply and it tells us what God's unchanging will is: This is what's right to God and this is what's wrong to God. I can't figure out the instructions in the owner's manual of my car, but I know what God says in the law. The law doesn't confuse us or mixed us up. It doesn't allow excuses. either. Looking at God's law is like looking into a mirror: We see what we've done wrong and we see what we haven't done right. The sight isn't pretty. In fact, the sight is scary and it's scary on purpose. The law threatens us. The law is God's gigantic IF: if you sin you will die. The great Lutheran preacher C.F.W. Walther preached the law one Sunday in his St. Louis pulpit, and a man sitting in a pew turned to the person next to him and whispered: If this man is right, then I am lost. Exactly. God's law has a purpose with our hearts. It cannot make our hearts pure, but it can and it does identify our impure hearts.

Nothing in my hands I bring. That's what the law tells me: Nothing in my hands I bring. And in this way the law prepares me to hear the gospel. With nothing to bring I am ready to receive. And what does God give? He gives me the perfect obedience of his Son who kept the laws I was supposed to keep. He gives me the perfect death of his Son who endured the punishment I was supposed to endure. He gives me the forgiveness of sins and he treats me as though I were his child. He calls me blameless although I am not. He considers me holy although I am not. He overlooks the impurities of my heart and provides me with a heart that is pure, pure in his sight and pure to love his law and to rejoice in doing what he commands. With the law God brings me low so that with the gospel he can raise me up. With the law and the gospel I look to Jesus and say: Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to thy cross I cling. Amen.