

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 3, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
AN INSIDE JOB
Mark 7:14-23**

When I hear the voice of actor Mark Harmon (aka Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs) say the words, “Previously, on NCIS,” I know that the episode I’m about to watch of my favorite TV show is a continuation of a storyline from an earlier episode (usually, but not always, the immediately preceding episode), which ended in a dramatic cliffhanger, leaving questions unanswered and the situation unresolved.

With a nod to Mark Harmon, I begin today’s message with: “Previously, in our Travels with Jesus.” It has been a few weeks; our special missionary guests spoke to us last Sunday; on the two Sundays prior to that, I spoke about “Holy Living in a Post-9/11 World.” But today we return to our “Travels with Jesus.” Previously, in Mark 7:1-13 (see also Matthew 15:1-9), Jesus clashed with the Pharisees and other religious leaders from Jerusalem who criticized Jesus and His disciples for their lack of diligence in following all the rules, regulations, and traditions that had been added over the years to the law of Moses. When they called Jesus and the disciples on the carpet for failing to wash their hands properly as the tradition of the Pharisees required, Jesus called *them* on the carpet for setting aside the commands of God in order to hold onto human traditions, for using their traditions as a way of getting around obedience to God’s commands (Mark 7:8-9). They had put the emphasis on the wrong things and, as a result, Jesus said: “You nullify the word of God by your traditions that you have handed down. And you do many things like that” (7:13).

Remember?

This is not something that only the Pharisees and religious leaders of Jesus’ day were susceptible to. We can all fall into the trap of turning *traditions* – think of them as *non-essentials* of the faith in which God has given us liberty – into *requirements* or *essentials* that we make as important as or even more important than the commands *God Himself* has given us.

Traditions can be good. They can be beneficial. They can add a richness to our spiritual life, to our relationships with God and one another. But not when they distract us from heart-obedience to God. Not when they distort our understanding of what God desires of us. Not when they get in the way of the Great Commandment to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and to love one another as Jesus loved us and loves us still.

Having spoken the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) to the Pharisees, Jesus now turns His attention in verse 14 to the crowd that had come to see and hear Him, and then in verses 17-23 to the disciples, where He gets to the real heart of the matter ... which is the *heart*.

The Pharisees were obsessed with things like hand-washing and dietary practices (along with such things as how far you were permitted to walk on the Sabbath, and hundreds of other regulations they had added to God's law). Here Jesus makes the point that what matters most to God is not how often you wash your hands – though Jesus is in favor of good personal hygiene, not only for your wellbeing but for the wellbeing of others around you.

Nor is what you eat or refrain from eating what matters most to God – though healthy eating and the proper care and maintenance of our bodies *does* matter. We know this because God has created us in His image (Genesis 1:26-27) and for His glory (1 Corinthians 6:20). Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you received from God? You are not your own. You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”

Your body matters to God. What you do with your body matters to God. What you put into your body matters to God. How you care for your “temple” matters to God. But it is not the only thing that matters to God. Nor is it the thing that matters most to God.

The Pharisees put the emphasis in the wrong place. They thought that the way to gain favor with God was by rigorous (and rigid) obedience to all the laws and traditions of Judaism. They thought the way to become holy and accepted in God's sight was through the ritual observances of the Jewish Law. They thought that if you went to church, if you tithed religiously, if you were careful not to violate the Sabbath, if you fasted regularly, if you read the Bible every day, if you carefully observed all the dietary rules about what is kosher and what is not, if you carried out all of the rituals prescribed in the Law and traditions, you would earn God's favor. God would be pleased with you. And you would receive your reward.

For the most devout among the Jews, this could literally be a matter of life and death. In the 2nd century BC, during what we call the Intertestamental Period (the time between the end of the Old Testament writings and the birth of Jesus), there was a Syrian king named Antiochus Epiphanes, who was determined to exterminate the Jewish people. He was an evil man. He was like Hitler before Hitler. One of his methods was to force Jews to eat pork – meat that was considered unclean and was prohibited in the Law of Moses. Hundreds of Jews refused to do it, and were killed as a result. That is how seriously they took the matter of defilement and purity. We can – and should – salute them for the depth of their devotion to God and His law. They were willing to die instead of violating either the law or their consciences.

But to the Pharisees who followed in their tradition, Jesus said: “You're missing the point! Your focus is in the wrong place. It is not what you eat or don't eat that is most important.” It is not a question of being a vegan, a vegetarian, or a carnivore. It is not a matter of being a devotee of Jenny Craig, Slim Fast, Weight Watchers, Noom, or some other eating plan.

And, says Jesus, it is not whether or how or how many times you wash your hands – or even, if I dare to say it, what you think about masks and vaccines. What you think and do about these things matters, but they are not what matters most. Your perspective on COVID issues doesn't necessarily make you a better person or a better Christian than someone who holds a different view. In the spirit of our EPC motto, we have to hold fast to our unity in essentials, to protect and defend our unity, while affirming each other's liberty to make personal choices in those things that God has given us liberty, and treating each other with charity (love) in all things, including those things in which we disagree.

What matters most to God is not following the right rituals or going through the correct motions. It is not the outward appearance that matters most to God. It is the heart.

Jesus relates this specifically to food. Spiritually speaking, He says, what you eat cannot destroy your heart. It is true, physically speaking, that an unhealthy diet can lead to an unhealthy heart. If you don't eat in a healthy way, heart disease may well be the result. But Jesus is concerned here with the condition of your soul. He is concerned with your heart as the center of your personality. It is the root of your desires and your will. It isn't dirty hands or germs or chemicals or fatty foods that damage and defile your heart. His point is that the things that most affect our spiritual vitality, the health of our souls, and our relationship with God are not external but internal.

Sin always begins in the heart. Sin always proceeds from within. Sin is an inside job. It is true that temptations of different kinds come from outside. Each of us has our own particular temptation triggers – those things that trigger temptation in our hearts. But temptation can triumph only if it lands on fertile ground in your heart. Here is how James 1:14-15 describes the anatomy of sin: Temptation happens when we are dragged away by our own evil desire and enticed to sin. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

What James is saying – and what Jesus is saying – is that sin is an inside job. It is rooted in our hearts. So, contrary to the Pharisees, what Jesus is saying is that what we need most is not cleaner hands but changed hearts.

Sin is an inside job. It is a reflection of who we are in our fallenness apart from God's saving grace. Jeremiah minced no words in declaring that "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jeremiah 17:9). John Calvin said: "The human heart has so many crannies where vanity hides, so many holes where falsehood lurks, is so decked out with deceiving hypocrisy, that it often dupes itself." Neither of these is an optimistic or hopeful diagnosis, is it?

(Let me add a parenthesis here to say that the doctrine of total depravity [the T in the TULIP acronym] does not mean that you or I or those we love are as bad, as evil, as wickedly depraved as we can possibly be. "Total depravity" is probably not the best way to frame it. R.C. Sproul, I think, preferred the term "radical sinfulness" to describe the fallen condition of our hearts apart from the saving work of Christ. We are radically

sinful in the sense that, as the word *radix* implies, we are sinful at the core of who we are. It is not that we are as bad as we can possibly be, but that sin has tainted us in every way and in everything we do. Jesus believed – and believes – in the doctrine of radical sinfulness. He knows it to be true. He knows that every one of us is born with a sinful bent. He knows that we are all natural-born sinners. It is not a flattering thought or a popular idea these days. But it is true. End of parenthesis.)

From a human point of view, there is no cure for the human heart. There is no cure for the evil (and the capacity for evil) that resides in the heart of every person. There is no vaccine you can take or program you can install that will remove the virus of sin in your life.

The sin-virus that resides in each human heart manifests itself in a multitude of ways. Jesus mentions no fewer than 13 of them:

- Evil thoughts (that is a broad category)
- Sexual immorality (another broad category)
- Theft
- Murder
- Adultery
- Greed
- Malice
- Deceit
- Lewdness
- Envy
- Slander
- Arrogance
- Folly

This list is representative, not complete. Paul gives a similar list in Galatians 5:19-21, before contrasting it with the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23). Not all of these may be besetting sins or recurring temptations in your life. I hope not! But if you're honest with yourself and honest with God, I have no doubt that you see yourself in some of these actions and attitudes that reside in a sinful human heart.

This would be a reason for despair, if not for the magnificent message of God's grace to us in His Son Jesus Christ. Sin is an inside job. In a different way, so is grace.

Air pollution is a serious matter. The pollution of rivers and streams and lakes and oceans is a big deal. Creation care matters. The care of creation should be an ongoing concern for Christians because God gave humankind the responsibility to subdue the earth and to rule over it as God's representatives (Genesis 1:26-30).

Sin pollution – the pollution of the human heart and its rippling effects on our relationships, culture, institutions, and the created world itself – is the core issue Jesus

came to address. And not only to address but to resolve in His redemptive work on the cross for us.

Proverbs 4:23 says that heart is “the wellspring of life.” The heart – *your heart* – is so important that the Bible says: “Above all else, guard your heart . . .” Above all else! There is nothing, absolutely nothing, more important in your life than the spiritual condition of your heart.

Sin is an inside job. It starts in the heart and works its way out in our attitudes and actions and words. But we are not stuck in our sins. You are not stuck in your sins. Nor am I in mine. Why? Because of grace. God’s grace, which comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will, changes us from the inside out. It changes us on the inside, and the change it makes in us – inside – finds expression on the outside in the way we live.

Let me ask you:

When God looks into your heart, what does He see? Does He see a life that looks good and clean and religious, even holy, on the outside, but is polluted on the inside?

Or does He see a heart that has been made pure and a life redeemed by the blood of Jesus? What does He see in your heart?

Has His grace changed your heart?

The Bible says:

“Come now, let us reason together.
Though your sins are like scarlet,
They shall be as white as snow.
Though they are red as crimson,
They shall be like wool.”
(Isaiah 1:18)

God can do that. He can make that happen.

Sin is an inside job. But so is grace. Sin has stained the soul of every person who has ever lived. Except the One who willingly gave His life on the cross to remove the stain of sin and guilt from your life and mine. In His mercy and grace, Jesus can get the stains out that no amount of soap and water ever could.

He can do that for you, just as He has for me and for countless others. And He *will* do it, if you will just ask Him in faith, believing.

His grace changes hearts. His grace changes everything.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.