

Defilement, Real Defilement

Mark 7:14-23

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 30, 2015

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

God is obsessed with cleanliness.

Under Moses God commanded the Israelites to be clean. He forbade them from standing in His presence at the sanctuary unless they were clean. He did not permit an unclean Israelite to approach His presence at the sanctuary. Therefore an unclean Israelite could not offer sacrifices to God and thereby receive His grace and blessing.

What things made the Israelites unclean? There were a wide variety of things that God taught them would make them unclean. Let us take a few examples. First of all, eating unclean foods would make an Israelite unclean. For example God told them that eating pork would make them unclean. If they ate pork and did not otherwise purify themselves God forbade them from approaching His presence at the sanctuary. There were other foods that made them unclean. You may read the book of Leviticus to find out what they were.

Secondly, God declared to Israel that certain sicknesses would make them unclean. The most prominent among them was infectious skin diseases. Any skin disease that wasted the flesh away or that spread in the skin made an Israelite unclean. Unless they were purified from such uncleanness God forbade them from standing in His presence at the sanctuary. God declared many other diseases to make a person unclean. You may read more about them in the book of Leviticus.

Thirdly, God declared that certain household pests and circumstances would make a house and the people in it unclean. For example, mildew in the wall of an Israelite home that spread throughout the home would make the home and those who lived in it unclean. Unless the home or the people living in it were purified God forbade them from approaching His presence at the sanctuary.

Finally, God declared that anyone who touched a dead body was unclean. Unless they were purified from their uncleanness, God did not permit them to approach His presence at the sanctuary. Therefore they could not offer their sacrifices and receive God's grace while they were unclean.

If you read the book of Leviticus carefully, you will find that everything that made the Israelites unclean had some association with death. Whether it was mildew, leprosy, or pig's flesh, it all was associated with death. Therefore when God declared you unclean it was because there was some form of death in you or on you. It is therefore death which prevents you from standing in the presence of God and receiving His blessings and grace. If we did not have death on us we would still be walking in the presence of God in the garden in the cool of the day.

If an Israelite became defiled, how was he able to stand in the presence of God again? Was he simply cast out forever? Could he never have access to the presence of God and His grace and blessings?

As a matter of fact he could, but he had to be made clean again. God prescribed certain things that had to be done by an Israelite in order for that Israelite to be purified from his uncleanness thereby making him fit to stand in the presence of God again and to receive His grace and blessings. What did an Israelite have to do in order to be purified from his uncleanness? It depended on what had made the Israelite unclean in the first place. For most forms of uncleanness God commanded that the Israelites wash their clothes, take a bath and wait for evening. If they had washed their clothes and bathed, then once evening came, they were clean again. After that God would permit them to stand in His presence, make their sacrifices, and receive His grace and blessings.

For other forms of uncleanness such as leprosy, a simple bath was not enough. Several baths were required, plus shaving off all of one's hair. In addition to this, lepers whom God was purifying from their uncleanness were also required to make a special sacrifice that was for the purification of lepers only.

With these sacrifices and washings God purified His people from the death that was in them or on them. This permitted them to stand in His presence, make their sacrifices and thereby receive His grace and blessings.

Leviticus seems so old. To modern people such as ourselves it seems so out of date. Leviticus seems out of touch with the world in which we live. Leviticus prescribes animal sacrifices which we no longer make even though we hold that the Bible is God's Word. It commands all of these washings for various kinds of diseases. Some of these diseases we no longer consider to be as bad as God makes out in Leviticus. Most of us eat pork. If we do not eat pork, it is because of diet and not because of religious conviction. In fact most of us try to pretend that the book of Leviticus is not in the Bible, not that we claim that it is not in the Bible, but that we do not use it and some of us do not even like it. We would not even acknowledge the book of Leviticus if it were not in the Bible. In fact, it is only because the book of Leviticus is in the Bible and the Bible is God's written word, that we honor the book of Leviticus at all.

But even we moderns cannot escape the book of Leviticus and what it teaches us about the world. We moderns also have notions about cleanliness.

Let us take our homes as an example. We clean our bathrooms. We clean our toilets. We disinfect them. We clean our kitchens. And why do we do this? We know that small organisms live in those places. Some of these organisms cause diseases. We don't like to be sick and so we clean those places to prevent those organisms from making us sick. If the organism is particularly harmful it may cause death. If people living in those places are very old or very young the ordinary organisms may cause death. In order to prevent disease and death we clean our bathrooms and our kitchens.

In this regard we also bathe. It is why we wash our hands with such regularity. We know that organisms which cause diseases live on surfaces which we touch with our hands. If those organisms get on our hands and we touch our eyes or nose or mouth those organisms will enter our bodies and make us sick. Since we do not want to be sick we wash our hands regularly with soap and water. We wash our hands before handling food. We wash our hands after using the restroom. We have rituals that we follow in order to prevent the spread of disease causing microscopic organisms. I have been told that public places should have the trash can next to the door of the restroom so that when people wash their hands and dry them with a paper towel, they may open the door by grabbing the handle with the paper towel thus preventing the spread of organisms that cause diseases by everyone touching the same door handle in a place where such organisms may live.

We wash frequently when we are sick. We wash frequently when we deal with those who are sick. When we are sick we wash our hands so that we do not spread the microorganism that cause the sickness to others. When others are sick we ask them to wash their hands or we wash ourselves after they have touched us. We wash the cups and pitchers and saucers that we have used when we are sick. We wash them when we are not sick not only to get the old food off of them, but also to prevent illnesses from spreading. We bathe in order to keep our bodies clean. Clean bodies spread diseases and become sick less. Dirty bodies spread diseases and become sick more.

Hospitals have protocols of cleanliness in place in order to keep diseases from spreading. It is standard procedure at hospitals that when leaving the hospital room everyone clean their hands using the alcohol cleanser in the room. When the patient has an infection that alcohol will not kill the hospital

requires visitor to wash their hands with soap and water. If the infection is serious the hospital will require visitors to wear rubber gloves, a face mask, and special covering over their clothes in order to prevent the infection from spreading through physical contact. Once the visit is completed the visitor removes those special items into a disposal container as he or she leaves the room. And let us not forget all of the special protocols of cleanliness that were required when the infection in west Africa began to spread.

Even modernity cannot escape the fact that cleanliness is a protector against death. In mild circumstances cleanliness keeps us from spreading and acquiring sicknesses. In acute cases cleanliness is the difference between life and death. And just like God said in the Old Testament uncleanness spreads from one person to another. Leviticus is not some Old Testament book that is no longer relevant to New Testament people. Leviticus is a description of the world in which we live.

So whether you are a Pharisee steeped in the book of Leviticus or you live nowadays and make sure that you cough into your arm, you need to hear the words of Jesus about real defilement. Does uncleanness kill? Sure it does. But the reason that death is in the world is not because of uncleanness. The reason that death is in the world is sin. Sin produces the uncleannesses which produce death. There would be no uncleanness if it were not for sin.

So if we are going to talk about defilement of the heart, we need to talk about something more profound than the rules for healthy living. We need to talk about what causes our death. What causes our death is the following: evil thoughts, sex before marriage, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. These things infect our hearts and they kill us dead. So if you are going to talk about defilement, real defilement, you must talk about these things.

Fornication comes out of the heart and it defiles a person. When anyone engages in premarital sex it defiles the person who engages in it and their partner. Both of them will enter marriage defiled from their previous sexual relationships. The only way to enter marriage undefiled is to enter marriage as a virgin. Otherwise your marriage will always have those other people in the bed with you. Even if you never talk about your previous sexual relationships with your spouse the memory of them is still in your heart. The comparison between your spouse and them is still there. This is to say nothing of the possibility of transmitting diseases from your previous sexual partners to your spouse. It all defiles. It defiles the body and even if you wash the body with medical checkups it defiles the heart.

Theft comes out of the heart and it defiles it. Theft defiles your neighbor in that you deprive him of the things that are his. Since theft comes out of the heart theft includes more things than what the state would define as stealing. Any time you obtain the things of your neighbor through dishonest means, even if they are legal means, defiles your neighbor. It deprives him of what is rightly his. It also defiles your own heart. Theft defiles your own heart because it places possessions ahead of other considerations. It places your desire for possessions ahead of your love for your neighbor. Because it places possessions in such a prominent place in your heart which designed to love others and not objects, theft defiles the heart. As long as what you stole is still in your possession, your heart remains defiled.

Murder defiles the heart. The heart knows in its innermost place that God created life to live. He did not create it to die. Therefore when you murder someone else, you defile God's creation. Since you yourself are a living being, you defiled yourself when you murder because you murder that which is like unto yourself, namely, you murder that which is alive. Your heart is defiled and will remain so unless purified by another death.

Adultery defiles the heart. Adultery defiles the heart because the heart promises its spouse on its wedding day that it will remain faithful. Faithfulness to one's spouse is constituted by many things, but it

is chiefly constituted by sexual fidelity. If you commit adultery, that faithfulness is broken. That faithfulness was what your heart pledged when you got married. When you violate that faithfulness in adultery it violates your heart. It also defiles your body because you have introduced another party into your marriage. The defilement then extends to your spouse.

Coveting defiles the heart. Coveting defiles the heart because it takes the other sins and hides them in the heart. You may not actually steal your neighbor's things, but when you want them for your own your heart is defiled in the same way as if you had stolen them. Coveting your neighbor's situation, his spouse, his hired men, his land, his equipment, his popularity or wisdom or whatever it is occupies your heart and makes it discontent with what God has given it. When your heart is not content with what God has given to it because you covet, the heart is defiled. Your heart will gripe against God and bear Him a grudge because you did not receive the things that you think you should have received.

Deceit defiles the heart. It defiles the heart because deceit withholds the truth from the neighbor who should have the truth. When the truth would benefit your neighbor and you withhold the truth so that your neighbor is not benefited your heart is defiled. When you lie about your neighbor it harms your neighbor's reputation. It defiles your neighbor and it defiles your heart because you lied about him. Your heart concocted a falsehood and told it to another. Deceit defiles the things that you obtain through dishonest dealings. It defiles every possession that you have through dishonest means.

Sensuality defiles the heart. The gratification of the lust of the eyes defiles the heart. It does not matter how such sensuality is satiated it defiles the heart. Whether by pornography or in person, indulging the lust of the eye defiles the heart. Many people use the excuse, "I look, but I don't touch," as an excuse to indulge in lust, but even if you avoid defiling your body through such excuses you do not avoid defiling your heart. Your heart will compare your spouse to the women after whom you have lusted and you will not find satisfaction in her. It defiles your heart.

Envy defiles the heart. Envy, like coveting, occupies the heart with the things that belong to your neighbor. Envy desires your neighbor's situation and begrudges your neighbor for having such blessings from God. Envy says to God that His distribution of wealth is incorrect and that you should have more. Envy is the heart's way of saying that you want to be God and that God is not doing a very good job of being God. Envy defiles the heart.

Slander defiles the heart. Like deceit it defiles the reputation of your neighbor. When slander defiles the reputation of your neighbor it defiles your own heart also. When your slander is discovered, it will be revealed that you are a liar and your reputation will stand defiled. And make no mistake your slander will be discovered. Anything that is said will be revealed in God's time and then the defilement of your heart will also be revealed.

Pride defiles the heart. Pride tries to replace God with yourself. Pride is what happens when you have a goal that you are bound and determined to complete even if it is against what God has commanded. Pride is the belief that you save yourself and that God is not your savior. Pride is the belief that it is good enough to do anything and that it can do anything. Pride is believing in yourself. When the schools encourage your children to believe in themselves they are encouraging your children to defile their own hearts. When the movies or the TV set tell your children to believe in themselves they are telling your children to defile their own hearts. If you believe such things, you are defiling your own heart. You have replaced Jesus with yourself. We excuse pride with notions like self esteem. We think that taking a little pride in ourselves betters our own lives. That is the sneaky way that defilement enters into our hearts and preoccupies us with ourselves and our own wants and needs and goals and we do not care what God thinks or what He has commanded. Prides is the worst of the defilements. It is idolatry. It tries to replace God.

All of these things are evil, foolish, and wicked. They come out of your heart and they defile you. You may worry about how clean your hands are when you eat or touch another person. You may establish a bunch of rules for yourself and your personal hygiene, but none of that will save you from death. You may be able to postpone death and do not misunderstand what I am saying most of those rules regarding hygiene are simple common sense and I follow them myself, but do not be deceived, germs are not the real defilement that kills you. Germs are only a result of a creation that is broken from its real defilement. The real defilement is the wickedness of our hearts.

If you are going to be purified you must be purified from the wickedness of your hearts, from fornication, adultery, murder, deceit, slander, theft, sensuality, covetousness, envy, and pride. For without purification of these things the defilement of your heart will only lead to your death.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.