

First they showed up in hospitals—one outside just about every patient’s door. Then they showed up in grocery stores. Lately I’ve seen them in airports and at gas stations. My wife keeps a bottle in her purse. On the Friendship table, next to the guest book you will find this item. What is “it”? “It” is hand sanitizer. We live in a very germ-conscience society, and we are all conscience of the need for us to wash our hands and keep them clean of germs as much as possible.

If you didn’t know any better, you might think that the message for today’s sermon was some sort of practical, moral lesson about washing your hands. That’s what it seems like at first. But there is a deeper cleansing before us today, much deeper than the deep cleaning you sometimes get for your teeth. Through this incident, Jesus teaches us to properly put into perspective these familiar words from Psalm 51, verse 10:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God.”

The Pharisees were the equivalent of what I would call the spiritual clean freaks of Jesus’ society. What Jesus does to the Pharisees in today’s text, is the equivalent of taking a thousand pieces of spaghetti, crunching them up, and throwing them into their spiritual house. He completely messes up their theological system of cleanliness. For all of you clean house people, you better bolt the doors and close the windows, for Jesus is going to enter your house with dirty feet, and trample on your clean carpet.

The quest for cleanliness from the Pharisees originated with God. In the Old Testament God gave his people the moral law, the 10 commandments. In addition, He gave them Ceremonial laws to govern their worship life. God gave worship laws to Israel to keep them as a tight knit nation until the Messiah came. When Christ died on the cross and the temple curtain ripped from top to bottom, opening free access to God because of Christ, the ceremonial laws were no longer applicable. These worship laws involved what foods you could eat and not eat. Sacrifices that needed to be made. Outfits that the priest needed to wear. And of course, washings. You had to wash if you touched an unclean animal, if you walked into a house with mildew, if you have a skin disease, or if you came into contact with a dead person. Yet this wasn’t enough for the Pharisees. They wanted even more washings to make sure they were clean. They added 613 rules that regulated Israel’s worship life down to the smallest details—ways to become or keep clean. You might say this was a very “clean” religion.

Many years later, in Luther’s day, this cleansing came about from beating the body and denying it any carnal pleasure. Monks would walk around in uncomfortable outfits. They’d beat their bodies. They would tirelessly pray, count beads, and walk around shoeless and separate themselves from society in the hopes of cleansing their bodies of any sinful thoughts and actions. People would look at them and think, “wow, these are really holy people!” These ideas are still very prevalent yet today. It’s called “asceticism.” The Buddhist monks do the same thing by trying to empty their minds and becoming one with the universe. The Catholics do it by religiously going to mass and confession, and not eating meat on Fridays. The Mormon missionaries do it by shirts and ties on one hundred degree days. Some Baptists and Mennonites try it by wearing longer skirts and never showing their knees. They do it by refraining from any alcohol or not buying Rated R movies. They’re trying to set themselves apart from the sinful world by doing physical things or refraining from physical things to make themselves seemingly more clean.

Whether you think so or not, you and I are also on the quest for cleanliness.

watch on TV anyways. Maybe you try to cleanse yourself from the world of sin by staying away from Katie Bells bar and restaurant. Perhaps you try to keep clean by staying away from a neighbor or acquaintance who leads what you would consider a “dirty” life. And you think to yourself, “I don’t get drunk like they do, I’ve kept myself pretty clean.” Your version of cleanliness may be that you don’t cuss like your neighbor does. It might be that you don’t go to the liberal church he goes to. Or your cleanliness might come from the simple fact that you go to church. And you have done a lot of things to help the church move forward. Look at what I have done. Others look upon you as a great member, and a super Christian. All of us have these little outward rituals - these “washings” - that we believe make us different from others - set us apart as what we would consider “clean,” unlike the filthy world around us.

For some reason, Jesus didn’t buy into the “clean” system of the Pharisees. Like a bunch of slobs, when Jesus and his disciples sat down to eat, they didn’t wash their hands, their pots, or anything. They just started eating! 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?”

Jesus answered them why. “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.” For Jesus, it came down to one main point - “where does God’s Word say that I have to wash my hands before I eat?” What was worse, was that these “traditions” of the elders were causing them to let go of the commands of God. In one example that this text doesn’t cover, Jesus mentioned that the Pharisees would ignore the needs of their parents in order to give the money to the church. It was called the Korban. Why? Because that’s what their elders told them to do. Any cow or donkey would have known that their parents needed it more than the church, but they decided to leave their own parents starve to death so the temple could get some new gold handles on it’s door. Jesus said, “whatever happened to the Fourth Commandment?”

Let’s turn the table on ourselves. Just because someone raises their hands when they pray or shouts out “Amen,” is that evil? Just because our tradition doesn’t go that way, does that make it wrong? Show me in God’s Word where it says we have to follow a liturgy or have a confession or have three readings or stand up and sit down in a worship service. Where does it say this is “unclean”? “Show me the money,” “where’s the beef?”, Jesus says. We need to be careful that we don’t label something as “sin” that really isn’t. What Jesus was trying to do with His statement was to turn the tables on the Pharisees. Instead of having them ask Him, “why AREN’T you washing”, he turned the tables on them and asked, “WHY ARE you washing?” It’s nothing but hypocrisy!

After this, Jesus really drove the dagger home. He completely messed up their spiritual cleanliness with the following words. “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.’ ” For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’” What was Jesus getting at? He was saying to them - “if you want to rid yourself of evil - you’re starting at the wrong spot! Instead of worrying about what’s

outside you - look at what's INSIDE you. You've got a heart that is pouring out greed, vulgarities, envy, slander, arrogance, and all kinds of garbage. If you really want to clean yourself, the first thing you're going to have to do is to rip your own heart out!"

So you thought you could make yourself clean by refraining from alcohol? You thought you could be pretty acceptable to God by not watching dirty television shows? You really thought that if you paid your taxes faithfully you would really be acceptable in God's sight? You really thought that by coming to church or giving money you would somehow be "cleaner" than the rest of the world? You actually thought that you could blame your sin on the world and the devil? Even if you did manage to refrain from these outwardly evil things - you'd still have a filthy heart. You can't brush it like you can your teeth. There is no soap that you can buy at the store - no heart medicine that will make it clean. Even if you tore it out and replaced it with a pig's heart or a mechanical one, it would still be filthy. The fact of the matter is no matter how much you try to cleanse yourself through your outward rituals - whatever they may be - it won't work. YOU are sinful down to your heart - and there's NOTHING you can do about it.

But there is something God can and did do about it. There is a cure. The answer is found in [Romans 3:21-24](#). "Now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus".

When Luther read this, He finally realized how he could get this cleansing that he was searching for. Instead of trying to purify himself through his ritual beatings and works, the wounds of Christ could come from heaven and swallow him up. God could take His own righteousness - in the life and death of Christ - and give it to Luther through faith. After all of his working and striving, he finally realized that it was already given to Him in Christ - two thousand years ago! My friends, if you really want a clean heart - if you really want to be holy before God - He wants you to look to the cross of Calvary, and believe Jesus was crucified for you. He wants you to envision the perfection of Christ as having come down from the cross and being placed on you, in you, and through you. He wants you to look at yourself as if you were actually as perfect as Jesus Christ - because that's how God regards you when you believe in Christ.

Jesus crushes any quest for cleanliness in yourself, and then He provides the cure by saying, "I am what you have been looking for! Instead of killing yourself through your rituals to be clean, look to Me! My perfect life and innocent death has provided a righteousness and holiness for the entire world. Believe in Me, be baptized, and the purity you have been looking for will be given to your body and soul - even your heart - in the blink of an eye." So why do you want to keep the commandments? Not to make ourselves more clean. Rather, we try to keep them to say Thank you to Jesus for giving us a clean heart. We follow them because they are a good guide to living a life that pleases our Lord. So Lord, please Create in me a clean heart oh God, and renew a right spirit within me. You alone can clean me on the inside out! Amen.