

This Sunday's texts:

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Ephesians 6:10-20

Mark 7:14-23

Sin and Obedience – Heart Issues

Pastor Jim Cords

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Please stand for the reading of the Gospel the holy gospel comes to us from the gospel of Mark the 7th chapter:

Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. "All of you listen," he said, "and try to understand. It is not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart." Then Jesus went into a house to get away from the crowd, and his disciples asked him what he meant by the parable he had just used. "Don't you understand either?" he asked. "Can't you see that the food you put into your body cannot defile you? Food doesn't go into your heart, but into but it only passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer." (By saying this, he declared that every kind of food is acceptable in God's eyes.) And then he added, "It is what comes from inside that defiles you. For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you."

The gospel of Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we are your creation. Help us to remember the love and the joy that you take in us, your children. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This is not probably one of the most joyful sermons you're going to hear. It will deal with the reality that we are sinners. And it will deal with some of the false notions we sometimes let us think that when we consider ourselves better than we really are. When we see the obedience that is in our lives occasionally when we are loving and serving others and then when we turn it on its head by being proud of it and by taking the glory for ourselves.

There's a Latin phrase that was at the heart of the Reformation in Luther's teaching. It's called *simul justus et peccator* and it means at the same time both saint and sinner. Now that's really good news. It's really good news because most of us are very aware that we still have sin in our lives. And *simul justus et peccator* means that we're still saints by the grace of God even

though we keep messing up, even though our selfishness continues to make itself known, so the sin in our lives doesn't disqualify us from God having made us his own and made us right with him. Just like the work that our children sometimes require of us doesn't change the fact that they are our children and we love them. Unfortunately, there are times in my life when I've been so disappointed in myself that I begin to allow myself to doubt myself whether or not God can still love me in spite of my sin. Therefore we need this gospel proclamation to remind us that God's love and God's grace and mercy continue to be for us even in the journey of this life which is filled with the reality of both being a saint and a sinner.

In the gospel today, Jesus is continuing to confront the Pharisees and teachers of religious law. He says, "It's not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart."¹ Grammatically, this is problematic. It's problematic because it seems to suggest that the defilement doesn't happen until something comes from our hearts. And the fact of the matter is it doesn't come from your heart unless it's already there. It may get revealed. It may be that now you can't hide from it as well because other people heard you or saw you, and saw the evidence of your defilement show up on the outside. But what Jesus is really saying is that it's not about contamination. It's not about something out there making us do something. It's not about the reality of temptation.

Here's the problem. We love to blame something else. If television shows and movies didn't show so much skin, we would be okay. If commercials weren't so effective in making us want that expensive car that causes us to covet and lust for some we don't have, well, we would be content. We would be fine. It's *that* thing that is the problem. When in reality, our hearts are the problem. The reality is we are sinners. It's a problem of the heart and God is more concerned about the heart than he is the external realities that simply bear witness to the defilement that is in our souls.

I want to stop because I see the depression already settling in the room. And if it's not settling in the room, at least it's settling in my mind because that's depressing news. And so I remind you again of that Latin phrase, *simul justus et peccator*. Yes, that's the reality, but so is God's grace. So is God's reconciliation. Nothing is able to separate us from the love of God that

¹ Mark 7:15

is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Admitting the reality of our sin allows us to admit the reality of the struggle of our daily lives. But it doesn't change the grace that God offers. It doesn't change the love that God offers. It doesn't see the wonder and beauty that God sees also in you.

"It is what comes from inside that defiles you. For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, ..." ² Come on, Paul. Come on, Jesus. We got it already. We don't want to keep hearing the list. But you know what the truth is? The truth is we don't want to experience the reality. We see the reality in our news, mostly over there somewhere. In the last several days, it's been over there in Afghanistan. The brutality of a suicide bomber killing many, many people and we think how does that happen? How does anyone become so evil? Or we hear about child abuse? Or any number of the other heinous realities in our world and we find ourselves saying how is that even possible? And sometimes as we look at the issues of our own hearts, we even can utter that phrase, "except for the grace of God, there go I."

We begin to recognize in our lives that we're more capable of evil than we want to think, that there's a reality that some things can trigger anger in us that we didn't even know was in there. We've been privileged in our lives because Marilyn has had a career with American Airlines. We've been able to fly to many places in the world. I remember one particular trip where we went to France. The children were with us. You take the subway and you go to all kinds of places and you see all signs. I mean, they have *history* over there. We don't have history. I mean, they have *history* over there. So we're having a great time, and we're on the subway and keep a close eye on the kids, of course. Paul is running up ahead of me. We come up out of the subway and go through the turnstile. Paul is heading up the stairs. I'm about 10 feet behind him and a man put his hand on top of Paul's hand on the rail, meaning Paul couldn't move. He jerked his arm and he looked up at this guy in fear and this guy looked me in the eye. And Poppa Bear was having some emotions that I didn't know I was capable of. You see, often those feelings come in a place of self-defense. But as I've become an adult, I've realized those self-defense, they're nowhere near as strong as if you mess with my family. I can't even imagine what would happen if someone did that to my grandchild. Now I should

² Mark 7:20-22

probably finish the story, just so you're not left hanging on it. This person was looking me straight in the eyes and all of a sudden, his eyes shifted and they shifted off of my eyes and over my shoulder. And I realized there was a guy behind him coming up to try to steal my bag. The first guy that was messing with my son was a distraction. It didn't happen. Everyone was fine. They ran away. Nothing was lost and no one was hurt. But it revealed to me that the evil in the world isn't just out there. It can percolate in me and in my heart, oh so quickly.

In our first lesson today, it said these words. "And now, Israel, listen carefully to these decrees and regulations that I am about to teach you. Obey them so that you may live, so you may enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you."³ The Bible gives us guidelines for life, instructions for living, law, if you will, that we are called to obey. But I want to ask you this question. As Moses is giving this decree to the people of Israel, is he saying if you want to be God's people, then you will need to live this way? That is, if you want to be loved by God, you will have to obey his law. Is that what the Bible teaches? Is that what we experience in our families? If our children will eat the dinner we put in front of them and not complain about the broccoli, then we'll love them. Is that how we think? No.

Let me point out something about Deuteronomy. These are already the chosen people of God. These are already the people that God has rescued from Egypt. God loves them and gives them this direction so that not only they will be blessed, but the world will be blessed through them. It isn't an "if, then." It's an "I love you and here's a gift for how you can live better in the world and better together." Your selfish desires might not notice, but our God who is good will give us instruction for how we can live our lives.

Listen to this from Proverbs 20:9, "Who can say, 'I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?'" In case you missed it, this is a rhetorical question. This is a rhetorical question that knows that the answer is *no one* can make this claim. Again, I got to pause for a moment because some of you are starting already to churn up the frustration. After all, if you listen, what you just heard me say is you can't clean your heart. And you're probably thinking but I want to. Or maybe even, I can do better than I have done.

³ Deuteronomy 4:1

But the reality is we don't cleanse ourselves of sin. We also hear David pray, "Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me."⁴ The appropriate posture toward the sin in our lives is a posture of confession. It's a posture of "Lord, help me." And it's not a prayer that works when it's said once and then forgotten. It isn't a conversion experience that transforms us and then for the rest of the days of our lives, the struggle goes away. It's *simul justus et peccator*. It's at the same time, in every day, dealing with the reality that we are both blessed by God's grace and wrestle with the sin that is the reality of our lives.

So in Lutheran terms, we talk about dying to ourselves and being raised with Christ. Not improvement, but death. Martin Luther, in his Small Catechism, when referring to baptism, uses a question/answer model. He asks this question about baptism. What does baptism mean for daily living? I realize that today we're going to affirm this baptism that happened some days ago and I'm assuming you were baptized a little while ago. And the question in the Small Catechism is now what? What does that baptism, regardless of when it happened, what does it mean for today? What does it mean for our daily living? And Luther answered the question. It means that our sinful self with all its evil deeds and desires should be drowned through daily repentance and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.⁵ His mercies are new every morning. Each day we surrender. Each day, through repentance, die to ourselves and trust in God to work goodness in and through our lives. And we don't count ourselves as good, but we count God as good. We marvel at his ability to pour blessings into our lives and even more so, blessings through our lives, so that others can experience his grace and goodness in the midst of their struggle which too often they also think might disqualify them from God's love.

Simul justus et peccator simply reminds us of the reality that we experience. If we try to pretend we don't have sin, we're just deceiving ourselves, but when we confess our sin each day, God who is faithful and just, forgives us of our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. His mercies are new every day. We don't have to wallow in that brokenness, but we can live in the grace and mercy of God as we were reminded of and refreshed in that love each and every day.

⁴ Psalm 51:10

⁵ *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, The Sacrament of Holy Baptism, IV

Philippians says it beautifully. “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ”⁶ God’s abiding presence with us through the struggle from the things that come at us from the outside and from the struggle of the reality of our own hearts and minds, Jesus says I am with you. God’s love will not abandon us. We have this amazing ability to confess our sins, live in the freedom of his grace and goodness. Daily renewal in God’s love and grace. Daily remembering that God says to you, his child, I love you.

I think the first moment that I recognized the true depth of Jesus’ love in a powerful way was when I was invited to go to the high school youth group as an eighth-grader. Some of you are saying that is not fair. No, it wasn’t fair. But I got to go. But you know what I didn’t do? Behave. I acted like an eighth-grader. I was annoying. I didn’t know what to do with myself, so I just, you know, acted like myself. I might have even said, I don’t know what came over me; that’s not who I am. But in reality, what came over me was exactly who I was. And I remember at the end of the night, Pat Jackson, youth sponsor said to me, “Didn’t appreciate some of your behavior tonight. See you next week.” She could have said, “You may be a little too immature still for the high school group. Maybe we should wait another year before we invite you back.” What she could have said is you’re too much trouble. What she did say was see you next week. You’re part of this family. You belong. You are a child of God. Thanks be to God.

⁶ Philippians 4:7