**MARK 7:9–23.** (EHV, alt.)

[Jesus] continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside God's commandment to keep your own tradition. For example, Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Whoever speaks evil of his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or mother, "Whatever help you might have received from me is *corban*" ' (which means an offering), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. So you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. You do many things like that." He called the crowd to him again and said, "Everyone, listen to me and understand. There is nothing outside of a man that can make him unclean by going into him. But the things that come out of a man are what make a man unclean. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!" After he had left the crowd and entered a house, his disciples asked him about this illustration. He said, "Are you lacking in understanding too? Do you not understand that whatever goes into a man from the outside cannot make him unclean? For it does not enter his heart but goes into his stomach and goes out of him into the latrine—in this way all foods are purified." He continued, "What comes out of a man, that is what makes a man unclean. For from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, slander, arrogance, and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and make a person unclean."

What does it mean to live as a Christian, to be a good, moral person? The answer to that question has become especially confusing for Christians in the United States over the last number of years. Does being a Christian mean supporting the Black Lives Matter movement or opposing it? Does it mean getting a vaccine or refusing to get one? Does being a Christian mean going on mission trips to help end world hunger, poverty, disease, or pollution? Does it mean only voting for certain candidates? Does it mean boycotting brands that support things like the transgender movement? Does it mean only eating certain natural foods?

Over the next few weeks, we're going to be looking to the Scriptures for guidance as to how the Christian life is supposed to play out in the home, at church, and in society. But before we go into those specific realms, in our Gospel this morning, Jesus takes us back to the two fundamental basics of Christian ethics.

**1.**

The first fundamental principle of Christian ethics is that, in order to be considered good in God's eyes, a thought, word, or action has to be in harmony not with popular opinion or even official church teaching as such, but with God's clearly stated word.

In the context here, the Jewish leaders were more concerned about the fact that some of Jesus's disciples didn't give their hands a ritual washing before eating than they were about God's actual commands. The Pharisees and Scripture scholars were elevating human traditions above God's word.

But Jesus won't have it. If any action or activity of human origin takes precedence over or contradicts God's word, that is a bad action or activity.

Now there are obvious examples of this same elevation of human ideas above God's word today. The most obvious examples are flat disobedience to God's commandments. God tells us to honor our parents; if we talk back to them, are rude to them, or won't provide for them when they need it, we are not being good people. God tells us not to let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths; if four-letter words and locker room language readily come off our tongues, we are not being good people.

But then there are the not-so-obvious examples—cases where society has made such a big deal of something that God says nothing about that we, too, start treating it as if it were a matter of good or bad, maybe even without realizing it. Or there are even cases where society so strongly praises something that goes contrary to God's word, that we, too, start thinking that it is a virtue. For example, a 2016 study revealed that teens and young adults generally consider not recycling to be worse than viewing pornographic images or reading pornographic content, even though God's word doesn't say anything about recycling, in and of itself, while he has plenty to say about sexual immorality. I would hazard that most people think it's worse to be sexually inexperienced at age forty than it is to honor God's word by remaining sexually pure your entire life, which means not engaging in any such activity at all as long as you remain unmarried. And I wonder how many of our church body's women feel like inferior Christians for being stay-at-home mothers rather than pursuing careers and being more public figures, even though God's word clearly and repeatedly promotes the former and, though it does not outright forbid the latter, commands nothing about the latter.

In fact, this principle of God's word making a good work is so strong that it can actually turn things that would otherwise be vices into virtues. Killing someone is ordinarily a sin, but if you have God's word on your side when you're doing it—for instance, if you are a duly appointed judge in a territory in which the death penalty is legal and you are dealing with a duly convicted murderer, or if you are a legitimate soldier fighting in a just war—then killing can actually be a good work. Hitting someone is ordinarily a sin, but if you have God's word on your side when you're doing it, such as if you are a parent disciplining your child (in love, as we'll talk about shortly) or an officer of the law restraining a criminal from criminal activity, then hitting someone can actually be a good work.

The first principle of Christian ethics is that God's word makes a good work.

However, even if God's word is being followed outwardly, that by itself still doesn't make a good work or a good person without the second principle Jesus gives.

**2.**

Jesus knew that when the Pharisees and Scripture scholars found their virtue in rituals like hand-washing, the fact that this hand-washing wasn't in God's word wasn't the only problem. There was an even deeper problem. And Jesus knew that the Pharisees and Scripture scholars weren't the only ones who had the problem. So later, Jesus "called the [larger] crowd to him again and said, 'Everyone, listen to me and understand. There is nothing outside of a man that can make him unclean by going into him. But the things that come out of a man are what make a man unclean.'"

Jesus then left the crowd and went into the house where he was staying, and his disciples asked him about what he had said. He replied, "Are you lacking in understanding too? Do you not understand that whatever goes into a man from the outside cannot make him unclean?"

He then continued, "What comes out of a man, that is what makes a man unclean."

What defines Christian ethics? A work must not only be in harmony with God's word, but the second basic is that it must also proceed from a good and pure heart. And so conversely, a heart with impure motives makes a work bad.

Just as the first principle is so powerful that it can turn something that is ordinarily a vice into a virtue, so this second principle is so powerful that it can turn something that would otherwise be virtuous, something in perfect harmony with God's word, into a vice. And so you have God telling his people in the Old Testament at various times how he hates their sacrifices, even though he himself commanded them, because they were not offering them out of faith in and love for God. This is why people can donate millions to charity or save hundreds of people's lives on the operating table and still be bad people in God's sight—because their motives are selfish and impure. God's word says we should not give up meeting together in church, but should do so regularly and encourage one another there, and all the more as we see the Last Day approaching, so we should. But you can go to church and Bible class every Sunday like clockwork, and if you are doing it simply for show or so that the pastor will say nice things about you at your funeral when you pass away or because you're getting paid to do it, your regular church attendance is an evil deed in God's sight, not a good one, even though not going would be evil too.

Even though the time when this was a hot button topic has passed, we should probably mention vaccines in particular. There is a reason Jesus said, "Everyone, listen to me and understand." There is a reason he told his disciples, "Are you lacking in understanding too?" We too still have the tendency to be so focused on outward things when it comes to morality. But listen again to Jesus's words: "*Whatever* goes into a man from the outside cannot make him unclean. … What comes out of a man, that is what makes a man unclean."

In the immediate context, Jesus was talking about food, but his words also apply to *whatever* goes into us from the outside, including vaccines. There are two things to say here, and the first is this: Getting a vaccine, in and of itself, is neither a virtue nor a vice. So too not getting a vaccine, in and of itself, is neither a virtue nor a vice. Now someone might say, "But aren't you putting peoples' lives in danger if you don't get a vaccine in certain situations?"

First, there are things that clearly do not put peoples' lives in danger, like sitting in a chair reading a book, and there are things that clearly do put peoples' lives in danger, like holding a loaded gun to their head and pulling the trigger. But in between, brothers and sisters, there is a lot of gray area. Every time I get into my car and drive anywhere, there is the chance I could injure or even kill someone. Add heavy rain, road construction, and sleep deprivation to the mix, and the chances get even higher. Does that mean I'm automatically sinning whenever I drive, or whenever I drive tired in heavy rain through an area of road construction? Earlier in this chapter, Jesus lets some of his disciples eat with unwashed hands, even though Jesus as the all-knowing God certainly knew about germs and the risk of sickness and disease spreading through them. Yet those disciples who didn't wash their hands were not sinning, and Jesus was not sinning by not encouraging them to wash their hands.

That leads nicely to another thing to remember: There is an extent to which we all need to be realists and not idealists. If we think we can live in a world where we can completely eliminate the risk of sickness and disease, and death from sickness and disease, we are living in a dream world. We all need to be comfortable with a certain amount of risk of death every day, both for ourselves and our loved ones. Christianity is not about creating a heaven on earth; it is primarily about coping and dealing with the fact that death is our constant companion on the earth and about making it to heaven when we die so that we can finally escape death there.

A person choosing not to get a vaccine would have to be making that choice for selfish reasons for that decision to be a bad decision. And a person getting a vaccine only for selfish reasons—for instance, so that they can virtue-signal and puff themselves up and make others feel guilty—is not doing anything good in God's eyes. Not a single one of us should condemn or assume anything bad about another person for not getting or for getting a vaccine, in any situation. And our response to someone unvaccinated contracting a disease should not be, "See, that's what you get!" It should be, "I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything I can do for you? I'm praying for you."

The second, equally important, thing to say about vaccines is this: Since God is primarily concerned about what is in our heart, about whether we are doing something out of love for him and others, and since he ordinarily works through physical means—sustaining us through food, making us healthy through exercise, giving us recovery through medicine—getting a vaccine, especially if there is a global pandemic, is something each of us should at least seriously consider. Now you might decide not to because of health conditions, or because you think that there hasn't been enough time or study to verify a vaccine's potential effects, or because you think that your own natural immunity, if you should contract a disease and recover, would be better for everyone in the long run. But out of love, at least consider it. And when considering any possible objections to getting vaccinated—and there are plenty of those too—remember Jesus's words. In the context, he spoke these words about all food, regardless of who prepared it and how it was prepared, and so they also apply to vaccines, regardless of how they were developed: "*Whatever* goes into a man from the outside cannot make him unclean."

The issue can get more gnarly when a branch of government issues a mandate with regard to vaccines, but I'm not going to go down that rabbit hole today, since we don't need to. For now, remember this principle: "*Whatever* goes into a man from the outside cannot make him unclean. … What comes out of a man, that is what makes a man unclean."

It's unfortunate that we even have to spend that much time on this subject, because Jesus wants us to realize we have *much* bigger issues than pandemics and disease and whether or not to get a vaccine. If godly ethics begin with the heart, then the prospect of any one of us being a good person is not good: "For from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, slander, arrogance, and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and make a person unclean." Now, on the one hand, Jesus is emphasizing that sins that we normally associate with actions, like sexual sins, theft, and murder, are first and foremost committed in the mind and heart, not with the external members of our body. But on the other hand, Jesus is telling us:

"Don't just think that you can be pure in the heart by sheer willpower, because here are the things that actually come naturally out of your heart." And *all* of them are bad.

The easiest and quickest way that I can think of to bring this home to us is to ask us to imagine ourselves coming into the possession of an invisibility ring. You can think of the Ring of Power from *The Lord of the Rings* books and movies, or you can think of the similar ring famously discussed in one of Plato's works thousands of years ago. If you possessed a ring that you could put on, and then no one could see you or hold you accountable for anything, what would you do? Oh, I'm not denying that you might do a few really nice things just to amuse yourself. But what else would you do? Are you going to tell me that the thought would never cross your mind of getting revenge and playing some cruel tricks on that relative, neighbor, or coworker who has mistreated you or is always making life difficult? Are you going to tell me that the thought would never cross your mind of seeing what this or that person looks like in the privacy of their bedroom, or even more than just looking? Are you going to tell me that the thought would never cross your mind of creating chaos and mayhem of one sort or another just to see the looks on people's faces? That you would never think of stealing that thing you know you could never have otherwise? Or would you choose to go the sin-of-omission route and simply seclude yourself in your invisibility so that everyone would just leave you alone? Or do you have some other evil in mind?

Do you see why all these other issues that get all the media attention today, all the things that people use for virtue-signaling and defining ethics, really don't matter one bit at the end of the day? Do you see how it is impossible for any of us to be good people on our own?

### 3.

If you do see that, good. Then you also see there are actually three principles of Christian ethics, not two. And the third is actually the most vital—faith in Jesus Christ.

Through Christ, it is a good and comforting thing that being a good person means living according to God's word and having pure motives in the heart. It is not good and comforting when we look at ourselves, but it is when we look at Christ. Otherwise, if these were not the basics of godly ethics, when Jesus voluntarily gave himself up to the Jewish and Roman leaders, when Jesus let soldiers nail his hands and feet to the cross, when Jesus hung there on the cross and continued bleeding even though he could have come down, all of that would have been sinful, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it in effect have been suicide, self-murder?

But no, he was carrying out his heavenly Father's express will. And it was his heavenly Father's express will because he loved you and wanted to save you. Jesus went through all of that because he loved you and wanted to save you. This was God's plan because he knew we were not ethical people and could not be good people on our own, so he took all our evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, slander, arrogance, and foolishness—all our uncleanness—on himself. And he washed it all away, not in some ceremonial washing ritual of human origin, but in his holy, precious, divine blood—and then he connected us to that in the divine washing institution of baptism.

Through faith in Christ, his cleanness covers us, so that we *are* good people in God's eyes.

Through faith in Christ, our hearts are changed, so that we begin to understand that his Word dictates what is good and bad, and so that we want to learn and do what his Word says, gladly and willingly, from the heart.

Through faith in Christ, good thoughts, chastity, contentment, respect for life, goodwill and, most importantly, love begin to come from our hearts.

What defines true ethics, godly ethics, Christian ethics? God's word. A pure heart. Jesus. Especially Jesus. It is ultimately Jesus alone who makes us good people. And since he has made us good people, ethical people, let us devote our lives, our work, our hearts, our all to him and his Word, to his glory. Amen.