

MARK 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23. (NIV84)

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) 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?” He replied, “**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’ [Isa. 29:13].**

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” ... Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “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 constitutes a good deed? What makes a good person?

Oftentimes we define a good deed as one that benefits us. If someone says, “It was nice of him *or* her to do that,” or, “It was good that they passed that measure *or* that law,” there’s a good chance that what was done or passed was to the person’s own advantage.

And we usually define a good person on the basis of external evidence. He or she has a family, and the family members are polite, honest, and hard-working. He or she gives back to the community or lends a helping hand when help is needed. “He’s a good man” or “She’s a good woman” usually calls to mind something like this.

But if that’s how we define good, it leads to confusion for Christians when hardship arises or when we’re thinking about Judgment Day. It makes God look unfair and not good. We ask the questions, “Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? Why is God going to send so many good people to hell?”

So it’s good for us to run across this Gospel now and again and to be reminded of what is truly good and what is truly evil, that is, what good and evil are in God’s eyes.

1.

On this occasion, the Pharisees were getting bent out of shape over the disciples eating food with unwashed hands. Their ritual hand washings, which they called baptisms, were meant to ensure ceremonial cleanness. So the fact that the disciples did not participate in such washings made them unclean in the Pharisees’ minds.

The problem was that the Pharisees had made a point of morality out of this even though God's word said nothing about it. As Jesus told the Pharisees, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: '...They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commandments of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

In other words, Jesus is saying that what is truly good and what is truly evil is first of all defined by the word of God, not by the word of men. If God commands it and expects it of all people, it is good. If God forbids it to all people and punishes it as sin and wrongdoing, it is evil.

Think of all the different ways we allow the traditions of men to define good and evil today. We've been conditioned to think that smoking cigarettes is evil, because society as a whole looks down on it. But the Bible says nothing about it. Yes, sometimes it causes damage to our health, and when that's clearly the case, then the Bible has something to say about it. But the Bible says we live seventy years or eighty, if we have the strength, so if your mother or grandmother is still smoking at age ninety, you're going to have difficulty proving that she is doing something evil according to God's word.

We've been conditioned to think that stereotyping or not using politically correct language when talking about certain groups of people, such as the disabled or the mentally challenged, is evil, because society as a whole looks down on it. But the Bible says nothing about these. It condemns ridiculing others and looking down on them while puffing ourselves up, but not the language itself that we use to describe them. In fact, you could argue that the Bible itself uses stereotypes, like when it says that Cretans are liars, beasts, and gluttons (Titus 3:12-13).

We've been conditioned to think that judging others, such as for their lifestyle or sexual preferences or gender identity, is evil, especially if we are parents criticizing our children for those things, because society says we should never judge and always be affirming. But the Bible only condemns arrogant and hypocritical judging (Matt. 7:1-5). (I don't mean to say that as if it never happens. It happens a lot, and all of us are probably guilty of it.) But the Bible does actually encourage us to talk to our neighbor about sin in a kind and humble way, because if they continue living in sin without repentance, they will go to hell (Matt. 18:15-18; James 5:20).

And there are other examples. We do well, whenever we see someone being turned into an object of shaming for supposedly doing something unconscionably evil, to ask ourselves whether it actually is evil in and of itself. That is, does God clearly forbid it in his Word? Good and evil are defined by the word of God, not by the word of men.

2.

But that's not all. Jesus also mentioned something else when he quoted Isaiah: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." He then spelled this out explicitly: "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.'" It wasn't just that the Pharisees had let go of the commandments of God. They let go of the commandments of God because they were more concerned about appearances and less concerned about the heart. And for something to be truly good in God's eyes, it has to come out good from the heart. And conversely, if something outwardly good comes out evil from the heart, it is still evil in God's eyes, even though it might be good in the eyes of men.

And what does it mean to come out good from the heart? It means to come from a good heart, from a heart filled with love for God first and foremost and then love for neighbor and a genuine desire for what is in his or her best interests.

“Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of man that makes him ‘unclean.’” Jesus was attacking the Pharisees’ idea that the disciples would become ‘unclean’ before God purely because of what they might touch outside, which might then get on their food when they didn’t ritually wash their hands, and which would then go into their bodies. “Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. This applies to food, medicine, drugs, vaccines, you name it. None of those things in and of themselves, taken or refused to be taken, make a person good or evil. It is what comes out of us, the motivations we have, why or for what purpose we are taking the food, medicine, drugs, vaccines, you name it, or why or for what purpose we are doing anything else, that makes us clean or unclean.

So it is both God’s word and the condition of the heart that make both a thing and a person good or evil in God’s sight.

3.

But then Jesus reminds us of the problem: “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.’” The problem is that nothing good comes naturally from our hearts. Our hearts are polluted and from a polluted spring can only flow polluted water.

In Socrates’s *Republic*, a man named Glaucon recounts a myth in which a shepherd finds a ring which, he soon discovers, gives him the power of invisibility. What would we do with the power of invisibility? What would we do if we didn’t have to be held accountable to anyone? In the myth, the shepherd goes to the palace, seduces the queen, murders the king, and becomes king himself. Does that shock or surprise any of you?

Glaucon then asks whether anyone could be so virtuous as to resist the temptation of killing, robbing, raping, or generally doing what he pleased to serve himself if he knew he could remain undetected? It’s a great question. And Jesus answers it by telling us that these are the evils that come from our hearts.

This is why only faith in Christ ultimately makes a person good or evil in God’s eyes. Only through faith in Christ do we clothe ourselves with the merits and righteousness of Christ, which he won and earned on our behalf, instead of with our own defective, so-called righteousness. Only through faith in Christ do we shine before God in holiness as Christ himself does. Only through faith in Christ does God begin to work new impulses and characteristics in us—pure thoughts, sexual purity, contentment, love, kindness, forgiveness, truthfulness, soberness, humility, and wisdom. Only through faith in Christ can we begin to see good and evil for what it really is, to seek what God wants rather than what humans want, and to do it with glad and willing hearts.

We can only be good, we can only be saved eternally, through Christ, the highest Good. Trust in him, not in yourselves, and you will be good, and you will also begin to do good. Amen.