

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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ABOVE ALL ELSE

Mark 7:14-23 and Proverbs 4:20-27

I'm not a medical doctor (like Tom Beach, Robert or Anita McSwain, or Steele Stewart), and I don't play one on TV. But I can tell you that, according to the American Heart Association, more than 25 percent of all Americans – nearly 80 million of us – have some form of cardiovascular disease. Coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death in America today, accounting for more than 450,000 deaths in 2004, the most recent year for which statistics are available. Each year, according to the American Heart Association, more than 1 million Americans experience a new or recurrent heart attack.

Your heart matters. A healthy heart is essential to a healthy life. Your heart is vitally important to the health of your body. What is true with respect to our bodies is equally true in the spiritual realm. A strong and healthy heart – a heart that is rightly related to God – is essential to your spiritual vitality and well-being.

The New Testament word for heart is the Greek word *kardia*, from which we get, among other things, the word cardiologist, the designation for a heart doctor (like Robert McSwain). In the Bible, the word “heart” refers not only to the physical organ that pumps blood to the body and is the center of our physical life, but also, in a spiritual sense, to the center or seat of a person's will, emotions, desires and affections. It is the source and center of our spiritual life.

Proverbs 4:23 refers to the heart as the “well-spring” of life. That is, the heart is the starting point, the source from which our attitudes and actions, our thoughts and words flow. So critical is the heart to our spiritual well-being that God's Word says to us: “Above all else, guard your heart” (Proverbs 4:23).

The *New Living Translation* of this verse says: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it affects everything you do.”

The Message paraphrase says: “Keep vigilant watch over your heart; *that's* where life starts.”

Today's English Version says: “Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts.”

“Above all else.” There is nothing, absolutely nothing, more important in your life than the spiritual condition of your heart or the state of your soul.

In our Scripture reading today from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus finds Himself in a conflict with the Pharisees. At the center of their conflict was a fundamental disagreement over the nature of true religion – that is, the kind of religion that pleases God. The Pharisees

were men of both giant virtues and giant flaws. They were staunch and devoted defenders of both the Jewish law and the tradition which had been handed down from one generation to the next by the rabbis. The tradition which had grown up around the law itself was intended to be a guide for the Jewish people in their pursuit of holiness, in their desire to please God. It was a kind of commentary on the law of Moses, and it had grown over a period of centuries to include rules and regulations for virtually every area and every conceivable detail of life. Its purpose was to help people apply God's law in the practical situations of everyday life. It was developed to help God's people know the boundaries of the law, so they could live obediently within those boundaries. The problem is that, as layer upon layer of rules and regulations were added to the law, the tradition began to take on a life of its own. It ended up distorting the law and actually became a way for religious people to get around the high standards of the law.

This was Jesus' charge against the Pharisees here in Mark 7. He said to them in verse 8: "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." They had allowed their own traditions to overrule or render null and void what God Himself had said. Listen to the charge against the Pharisees Jesus lays out beginning in verse 9. He said:

You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother," and "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death." But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: "Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban" (That is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that (Mark 7:9-13).

The fifth commandment – the commandment to honor your father and your mother (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16) – is a commandment we never outgrow. We never reach an age where this commandment no longer applies. But the rabbis came up with the "Corban" principle by which a person could dedicate to God money that otherwise would have been used to support his parents. While giving money to the temple would appear to be a noble and praiseworthy thing to do, Jesus saw this particular tradition as nothing more than a religiously acceptable way for a person to neglect his responsibility to care for his aging and needy parents. It was a convenient way to avoid responsibility for the welfare of one's parents when they needed help.

Jesus saw right through it. He did not mince words. With blunt directness, He told the Pharisees they were using their man-made rules – their tradition – to overrule God's Word.

The great virtue of the Pharisees was their zealous devotion to a meticulous life of obedience to all the rules, regulations and requirements of both the law and the tradition which had grown up around it. Their goal was to teach others, by both precept and their own example, how to be holy. Jesus had no argument with their goal. But He exposed

their giant flaw, which was to set aside the real purpose and spirit of God's Word in their obsessive, mechanical devotion to man-made tradition.

Like good Presbyterians, the Pharisees did everything “decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). No problem there. The problem was that in their pursuit of holiness – as they understood holiness – they elevated their own rules and regulations, their ideas and traditions, to such a place of importance that they lost sight of what God wanted. Instead of keeping the main thing the main thing, they majored in minors and lost sight of the main thing as a result. They effectively reduced religion to a mind-boggling list of DO's and DON'Ts. They failed to understand that true religion is not about rules, it is about a relationship. It is about a relationship with God born of faith, not works. It is not about what we do or don't do. It is about what God has done for us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is not about our observance of outward traditions. It is a matter of the heart.

What precipitated this whole conflict in Mark 7 was the Pharisees' complaint that Jesus' disciples were eating with unclean hands (7:1-5). It was not the case that the disciples' hands were dirty. It was not a matter of personal hygiene that the Pharisees were so concerned with. They were upset that the disciples of Jesus did not wash their hands “the right way” before sitting down to eat. The disciples did not follow the tradition of ceremonial hand-washing which had been handed down by the rabbis. That was the nub of their complaint.

But while the Pharisees obsessed about unclean hands, Jesus was concerned with the condition of a person's heart. The Pharisees were preoccupied with rituals and the way things looked on the outside. What mattered – and matters – to Jesus is the inside. It was – and is – the heart that Jesus is most concerned with, because the heart is the well-spring, the center and source from which all of life flows.

The Pharisees, in their religious zeal, believed that the way to gain favor with God was by a rigorous and vigorous obedience to all the laws and traditions of the Jewish faith. They were committed to the ritual observances of the law as the way to become holy in God's sight. Here is the way they looked at it: They thought if you went to church every week, if you didn't violate the rules for keeping the Sabbath, if you tithed religiously, if you fasted regularly, if you read the Bible every day, if you carefully observed all the dietary regulations about what was kosher and what was not, if you carried out all the rituals prescribed in the law and explained in minute detail in the tradition, you would earn God's favor. God would be pleased with you. And you would receive your reward.

For the most devout among the Jews, we are talking here about matters of life and death. Literally. In the second century before Christ, in what is known as the Intertestamental Period – the time between the end of the Old Testament writings and the birth of Jesus – a Syrian king named Antiochus Epiphanes set out to destroy the Jewish people and their faith. One of the methods he used was to force Jews to eat pork. Pork, as you probably know, was (and is) considered unclean by the Jews. Hundreds of these devout Jews refused to eat, choosing death instead, so that they would not defile themselves and

violate the law. That is an indication of how seriously they took this matter of ritual purity and cleanness. The depth of their devotion and commitment is something we can commend.

But Jesus insisted there was something more important at stake. He said it is not what you eat or don't eat that is most important. It is not whether or how you wash your hands that matters most. It is not a matter of following the right rituals or going through the correct motions. It is not the outward appearance that counts with God. What matters most with God is what is in your heart.

The Pharisees were masters at going through the motions. They could probably carry out the prescribed rituals in their sleep. But Jesus had this to say to them in verses 6 and 7:

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” (Isaiah 29:13).

I hope Jesus would never have any reason to say that about me. Or about us.

There is a riveting scene in the movie *The Godfather, Part II* in which Michael Corleone (the character played by Al Pacino) is in church for the baptism of one of his children. At the very same moment he is publicly professing his faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ, the new godfather's hit men are stalking and murdering the enemies of the family in cold blood. On Michael's orders. Though Michael Corleone honored God with his lips, though he went through all the right motions and said the right words, his heart was far from God.

An extreme example? Yes. But it demonstrates what the human heart is capable of. What determines our relationship with God is not the outward ceremonies or rituals of religion, but what is in the heart. The rituals only have value and meaning when they give expression to the inner life of the soul.

A healthy diet *does* make a difference in a person's life. What you eat or refrain from eating can contribute significantly to your physical well-being or sense of dis-ease. And it *does* matter to God how we take care of our bodies. The Bible teaches that life is a precious gift from God, and the body is meant to be a temple of the Holy Spirit, a place where God Himself desires to reside by His Spirit. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: “Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

We do not belong to ourselves. We belong to God. And we are responsible to God for the way we take care of our bodies and minds. How we care for our bodies matters to God. What we put into our bodies matters to the One who made us and redeemed us.

But what we eat, says Jesus, cannot pollute our souls. It isn't eating "unclean food" or eating with "unclean hands" that defiles a person. It is sin that pollutes our hearts and destroys our fellowship with God. And sin is a moral issue, not a matter of rituals or ceremonies or traditions.

Though what we eat cannot touch our hearts, there are things which can pollute or even destroy our bodies from the outside. Things like alcohol and drugs. And there are things which can pollute our minds and souls as well. Things like certain kinds of movies and music and magazines and TV shows and web sites that do their best to make sin look or sound appealing to us. And they are good at it. They are good at making sin look really good. All of these things, if we don't guard our hearts, can feed our sinful nature – our natural bent toward sin – and destroy us from within.

Above all else, the Bible says, guard your heart. Because it is the heart that matters above all else. It is not the image we project on the outside, or all the traditions or rituals we observe, that matter most to God, but what He sees on the inside and what flows out of our hearts. Remember what the Lord said to Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7 when Jesse paraded his sons in front of the prophet. Samuel was impressed with Eliab, Jesse's eldest son (and David's eldest brother), and was sure Eliab was the one God had chosen to be king over Israel. But the Lord said to Samuel: "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Neither a person's outward appearance nor their adherence to certain traditions or rituals gives a clear picture of what is in the heart. Sin is an inside job. It is a matter of the heart. And so is righteousness, as the righteousness of Christ our Savior is imputed to us by the grace of God, which is received by faith in Him.

It is not what you eat or drink that makes you clean or unclean, acceptable or unacceptable in God's sight. What pollutes our souls is what comes out of our hearts. The heart is the well-spring and source of every kind of sin imaginable. It is from within, Jesus says in verses 21-23, out of our hearts, that evil thoughts, sexual immorality (Greek *porneia*), theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness (which refers to open and shameless immorality), envy, slander (Greek *blasphemia*, which refers to speaking evil of either God or another person), arrogance and folly come. And every one of us is capable of any and all of these.

In one of his sermons, Ray Stedman recounted something a friend of his had written. His friend said: "I remember one of the most saintly women I've ever known, who startled me by saying, 'There is not a sin of which I am not capable. I could be a prostitute, I could be a murderer, I could be an embezzler.' I was convinced she couldn't. Instead, I thought she was displaying a large humility, and so I congratulated her on it. But she caught me up short. She said: 'You don't really believe I mean that. I do mean it, because I realize that if there is a person who has committed a single sin of which I feel incapable, then I am not able to love that person. The same sin that crops up in their life,

in their form, also flows through me and expresses itself in other ways. Until I believe that,' she said, 'I am a self-righteous, proud, arrogant woman.'”

There is not a single sin you can imagine that I am not capable of. And there is no sin under the sun that you are not capable of. As Jeremiah rightly understood, “The heart is deceitful above all things...” (Jeremiah 17:9). The stain of sin is everywhere in us. It has stained our souls. And only God can change our hearts. Only God can make our hearts clean. We can't do it ourselves. Only God can purify and transform our hearts, and keep us from evil.

It is out of the heart that all the issues of life flow. In Luke 6:45, Jesus said: “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”

Your heart matters to God. And you can be sure of this: God knows what is in your heart. He knows what is in my heart. And He calls us to guard our hearts above all else.

How can we guard our hearts? By hiding God's word there. Psalm 119:11 says: “I have hidden Your word in my heart that I may not sin against You.” As someone has said, “God's Word will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from God's Word.”

How can we guard our hearts? Listen to Paul's instruction in Colossians 3:1-2: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” In the words of Eugene Peterson, “Pursue the things over which Christ presides” (Colossians 3:1, *The Message*).

How can we guard our hearts? Colossians 3:15 says: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.” And 1 Peter 3:15 says: “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.” If Christ is on the throne of your heart, if Christ is ruling as Lord in your life, His peace will rule in your heart and He will keep your heart in safety, regardless of the storms or attacks you may be facing. As long as your heart is surrendered to Him.

How is your heart today? Let me urge you to make the prayer of David in Psalm 139:23-24 your own:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Remember that God is able to make your heart clean through the saving work of Christ on the cross. For God reaches down to us in Christ and says:

Come now, let us reason together.
Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow.
Though they are red like crimson,
they shall be as wool (Isaiah 1:18).

Let Christ rule in your heart by faith. And guard your heart, for it affects everything you do.

Let us pray:

O for a heart to praise my God,
A heart from sin set free;
A heart that always feels Your blood,
So freely shed for me.

A heart in every thought renewed,
And full of love divine,
Perfect and right and pure and good,
A copy, Lord, of thine.
(Charles Wesley, 1742)

Lord, let it be so in us. To the glory of Your name. Amen.