

Simon says, “Stand up.” Simon says, “Hop on one foot.” Simon says, “Sit down.” Either you are not familiar with the game, Simon Says, or you don’t really care what Simon has to say this morning. Now had I said: God says, “Stand up.” God says, “Hop on one foot,” you might have put some effort into it. Yet I hope that you would have first asked me: “Show me in the Bible where God says this.”

The Jews did not ask this. Their elders, basically the Pharisees, told them they had to wash their hands before they ate. Not with soap and water. Just water. Not to remove the germs. It was a ritual, a symbolical cleansing. Did God command this? No. Not even Simon said to do this. It came from the Pharisees. One of many commandments which they concocted within their minds and passed down, by word of mouth, to the people.

And all the people obeyed. “Wash my hands with water before I eat? Okay. Wash my cups, pots, and dining couches? Okay.” I suppose they would have hopped on one foot while they ate had this been commanded.

We come to our text here in Mark 7, and everything is going well. The people obeying as they should, not questioning all these commandments, except for Jesus’ disciples. They refuse to play the game. They are not obeying the oral tradition that has been kept for generations.

How dare they! This is so serious an offense that some scribes come down from Jerusalem to join the Pharisees, and together they approach Jesus with a stern rebuke: “*Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?*”

Some questions call for a gentle answer. Some are best met with silence. Not this one. Can you hear Jesus raising His voice in response? He turns their rebuke back on them. “*Well did Isaiah prophecy of you hypocrites as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.’*”

Now there is an interesting word: hypocrite. Hollywood is full of them. Actors and actresses; hypocrites in the Greek. People who pretend to be someone they are not. You can become very wealthy being a hypocrite. There are even awards that are given out to the best hypocrites in Hollywood. But the Pharisees have them all beat. The people don’t even realize that they are acting! The people are convinced that what comes from their lips is the same thing that is in their hearts.

What about us? Should I wonder about you, and you about me, whether we are only acting and pretending? That is not our concern. Only God knows that. He alone sees into the heart.

And what does He see? Does He see perfection? We know better. For we know what lies within our own hearts: sin, wickedness of every kind. Our hearts are defiled and unclean. This is why we sing together: “*Create in me a clean heart, O God.*”

We sing this, we pray this every Sunday, because Monday morning through Saturday night we are shocked by the sin that we see in our heart. Are we shocked? If not, then we have become numb to our own sinfulness. We should be horrified by our sins, Luther says; we should regard them as very serious. Because, and listen carefully to this – if we do not take our sins seriously, we will not take God’s grace seriously.

This is why we come here. We don’t come to God’s house faithfully because of some tradition that has been passed down. It’s not to obey some man-made commandment that we gather here on Sunday morning. We come here because we are sinners in need of forgiveness; in need of God’s mercy for us in Christ Jesus.

And that mercy is here, here for you. There is no sin that you bring in here which is beyond the reach of God’s mercy. There is no heart so grossly defiled, no life so unclean, that it can make Jesus turn away in disgust. Every sin was laid upon Jesus. He stretched out His hands on the cross to embrace every sinner. No one is left out. The word of forgiveness that Jesus puts in my mouth is for you, for all of you. God forgives you. “*Create in me a clean heart, O God*” – and He does. You are cleansed by Jesus’ blood. This is not my word to you. Not some man-made proclamation. This is God’s Word to you.

The scribes and Pharisees put their words above God’s Word. They applied their own word of command to the washing with water. This ritual, which all the people observed, was their sacred act, their sacrament, and not God’s Sacrament. And so, it was useless. And even worse, it gave them false hope. Joining water to our words does nothing to cleanse our sinful hearts. We need the words of our Lord.

And you have them. Baptism is no ritual, symbolical cleansing. It is God’s sacred act, His Sacrament by which, through which, He cleanses us of all sin. He took your sins, your uncleanness, and He gives you His innocence. He covers you with it.

And so, this week, Monday morning through Saturday night, think about this when you are tempted to use your hands in ways that are unclean. You were not called to uncleanness in your baptism. You are called to live in the manner in which God sees you in Christ Jesus: holy and blameless. Amen.