Mark 7:6-8 He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “The 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.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

This is a most difficult text to preach on. No, it is not difficult because of tricky nuances to the text or because the text is unclear and hard to grasp. In truth, this text is pretty straight forward and really it is as clear as a bell. The problem with this text is what it is teaching. The Pharisees and teachers of the law as well as other “believers” didn’t like what Jesus had to say. To this day, people who read this text do not like what Jesus has to say. That’s what makes this a hard text to preach on. It is a text that strikes to the very heart of our faith? And if you already think this text does not apply to you, then I can tell you right now you are not going to like what is in this sermon. Because what is said here is still relevant, important and, well, kind of “in your face.”

It is a hard text because Jesus wants you to examine your heart. For those of you who are here today, why? Why are you here? If you are going to tell me “It is because I love Jesus,” then on those Sundays that you miss, why aren’t you here? You don’t love Jesus on those days? For those of you who are not even here and who have determined that you don’t need church or you don’t need the teachings of Jesus, then you have a faith problem? (Now I realize at this point that many of you might just say, “Pastor, how can you address those not here?” My answer is simple. Many times when I call on people and remind them they are not in church I get the answer, “I may not be in worship but I am reading your sermons!” So I assume they are being truthful despite the fact that numerous times my sermons emphasize the importance of worship, of hearing the Gospel and of partaking in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The Lord tells us that His Holy Spirit works in our lives through these things, these three gifts: worship, Gospel and sacrament! Yet many miss out on two of those things on a regular basis but tell me they are reading my sermons or watching the videos. Which leads me to hope they really are watching or reading, but the fact that they still skip two out of three of God’s gifts, leads me to suspect they are not really watching and reading either. But there is hope! Hope that they really are reading and that they too will spend time examining their hearts and sizing up their faith.) That’s what makes this text so difficult, the fact that Jesus directs us to our hearts, our motives, and our lives. I would not do this text justice if I did not take you exactly where Jesus has lead.

Our theme for today will be: **WHAT’S IN YOUR HEART!**

This whole discussion started because the Pharisees and teachers of the Law determined to challenge Jesus and his disciples. They criticized the fact that the disciples did not wash their hands as they should according to the tradition of the elders. Yet please note what they said. These religious teachers knew that what they were criticizing was **“the tradition of the elders.”** They knew there was no Scriptural command from God to wash as the elders commanded and yet it is clear that they considered this washing to be a religious thing. Tradition over God’s Word. Man’s ideas over God’s Word. You get the feeling that there is a problem here?

You could say the problem is “hypocrisy” but that would be just a bit shallow on our part. Now hypocrisy is a word that says “outwardly you look good but your faith is an act and your heart is void of the wonder of God.” Clearly the hypocrites in this case were the Pharisee and teachers of the law, those men and religious leaders who should have known the truth of God and its heart piercing implications, but did not. Yet I believe the word goes deeper! Anytime you decide you know better than God, that would be hypocrisy. Now, most of us, in a heartbeat would clearly declare that we are not hypocrites. We hear and believe the Word of God. Hmmm! Then let’s ask a very important question. “Are you a good person?”

I am going to guess that many of you answered in the affirmative. Yet if that is the case, then why does Jesus teach what he does at the end of this section? Verses 14-23. **“Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 15 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.'"After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. 18 "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? 19 For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.") 20 He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' 21 For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"**

Did you notice that Jesus addresses “everyone?” In other words, no one is exempt from these words. And what do these words teach? That every single human being has a sin problem. Ever since the Fall into sin mankind has had a sin problem. It is the reason Jesus came. It is the reason that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. It is the reason Jesus ascended into heaven and now sits on the throne of God ruling over all things for our eternal good and salvation. Jesus came and brought redemption because of sin. Sin that pervades everyone in every way. Sin that separates from God and makes us think that our ideas, our thoughts, our ways of looking at things are just as good and right as God’s holy and Spirit filled Word. Don’t you get that such is the point of what Jesus said to the people before him” **“You have let go of the commands of God and are holding to the traditions of men.”** In other words, you have made your thoughts, your human thoughts more important than God’s revelation!

Look at what Jesus says is in our hearts! He is God, I think He knows. Now, it is true, when one has become a Christian, when one has been given a new heart and mind in Christ Jesus our Lord, these evils do not dominate, but they are still there and present us the biggest battle of our lives. Why do you think in our Epistle reading we got taught about the armor of God? The armor of God is really the Word and revelation of God found in the Bible from beginning to end. We need it because of the battle we are in, the battle for our souls that Satan will surely wage against us and all who desire to be children of God.

Why do I point this out? Because the only answer to the question “Are you a good person?” is “No!” “I am a sinner. I need the grace, mercy and love of God. I need daily help with my faith because of my sinful nature. I struggle every day, maybe every hour with the issues of faith, trust and confidence in God. I am my own worst enemy when it comes to my faith. God, I believe, help my unbelief!” Okay, that’s my answer and I will tell you why.

First there is sin. You want to grasp the horror of sin then just study the Law, even study the summary of the law, the Ten Commandments and you will realize that you are a rotten, low down, got nothing going for you before God kind of person. And by the way, the Law was given to expose and condemn our sin. And remember, God considers our thoughts, words and deeds when it comes to the law. That’s what scares me. God knows my head, my heart, my thoughts and I recognize that before God I am nothing but filthy rags and unrighteousness! You are going to tell me you are different? Then I will laugh at you and simply tell you that you need to study God’s Word more. There is sin and the law of God with blunt truth reveals it.

There is Jesus and redemption. I am not saved because I follow or I live right or I have the Spirit or any other measure of our silly human way of thinking. I am saved because Jesus lived the perfect life I could not, nor could the world. Jesus went to the cross and paid for my sins. He rose from the dead as absolute proof that His work and life is completely true. He is God. He is our Savior. He has provided eternal life because He completely atoned for us / me and then with His Father sends the Holy Spirit to grant us / me the gift of faith.

Faith is absolute trust in God. Once faith is mine, because of the work of God, I begin to grasp the battle I am in. Since I have faith, I am one of the main targets of the spiritual forces of evil warned of in Eph. 6! I will be attacked. My faith will be attacked. And these spiritual forces of evil don’t have any boundaries. They will use whatever they can to work at destroying my faith and destroying my soul. The attacks are relentless and as far as I can see will never stop until finally God grants me His call to come home and be with him. Now, let’s just consider how we can avoid the label: “hypocrite.”

**You might just be a hypocrite if:** You say you are a Christian but you persistently do things that are contrary to God’s Word and that God clearly says will cut you off from heaven! As God’s children we are to have the spirit rule our hearts and not our flesh and earthly desires. You can’t insist on sin and still be a child of God!

If you think that your life is any kind of proof that you are a child of God. Do you think that because you do this or that, because you are deeply involved in your church, because you feel the Spirit or you imagine anything else in your religious life is what makes you a child of God then you have the same problem the Pharisees and teachers of the law had before Jesus. They thought those same things! By their religious life and holy living they determined they were faithful and they were not. You are a child of God because you totally trust and rely on what God’s Word says about the wonder of forgiveness and eternal life: by grace you are saved!

If you think that what you wear or don’t wear determines your faith, or if you think what you eat or don’t eat determines your faith. You really need to look at the words of Jesus found here again, **“Nothing outside a man can make him unclean….”** The blood of the lamb is the only thing that makes us clean. (Oh, and in case you missed it, nothing outside can make us unclean because we are already unclean from within..!)

If you have the attitude that “you don’t have to be in church” to be a Christian, then you have a problem. When God called the Israelites from Egypt one of the first things to take place was the establishment of the Tabernacle, the priesthood and worship life. God said it was important even to the point that the law wanted a whole day set aside for God and worship. When Jesus started his ministry he appointed twelve men as his disciples and then once that ministry was complete those twelve and others went out and established congregations and gathering of believers so that the faith could grow and be shared. We are encouraged to worship, to not give up meeting together, to encourage one another as we sing psalms, hymns and praises to God. But you have determined that you don’t need it! Even Jesus the perfect Son of God made worship his habit.

Look at your life. What is the majority of your time consumed with? Let’s take to obvious necessities of life and eliminate them. Work which provides food and drink, clothing and shoes, house and home, etc. is one of those necessities. All those things are a part of our lives that we need to simply maintain our lives. After all those things are looked at, what is left? Is it the Lord! Is it being involved with Him, making time for him or is something else? I still like the old advice a professor gave: “In life, just analyze your checkbook and see where the majority of money is spent and you might discover your real priorities of life.” I pray you find it is God.

If you really think that God needs you to save souls? That you (or your church body) have the real scoop to save souls and bring people to faith? Do you really think God needs tricks and gimmicks to save? As far as I know God says it is the Gospel that the Holy Spirit works through, not meeting peoples felt needs.

Please, don’t let your human ideas and viewpoints skew the reality of how much we need the Lord and His Son Jesus. And don’t decide that you can somehow or in some way set Jesus aside persistently and regularly and still maintain a strong and viable faith. Don’t look at faith in the world’s silly ways, but look at it in the way that God has given it. If the Jewish Pharisees and teachers of the law, men whose outwardly pious lives would put many to shame, were called hypocrites, then we need to be all the more careful of our own lives and souls. Let go the traditions and ideas of men and hold to the wonder of God’s Word, our Savior Jesus. Amen.