

Partake? Abstain? Christ!
Mark 7:14-23
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 29, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus says, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It’s amazing how timely and relevant is the Word of the God! As we continue last week’s lesson on traditions, customs, righteousness and defilement, Jesus’ comments this morning ought strike a chord with us. True, some may ask, “How does Jesus speaking about ceremonial foods have anything to do with Christians who already know all foods can be eaten without sin?” But, take a step back from the immediate example to the larger issue, and you’ll see that this hits us square in the face – or, perhaps better considered, square in the heart.

The larger issue is whether temporal, material means used by the body are in themselves sinful or (on the other hand) necessary for righteousness... or, whether the true problem is the sinful condition, which cannot be remedied by anything we put into the body.

Man is both body and soul, and neither should ever be reduced to insignificance. Yet, the two are not cared for the same way. The soul is cared for by Word and Sacrament. The body is cared for by daily bread – temporal, material means – *as governed by the holy will of God.*

Thus, unless something done to and for the body is expressly required or rejected by the holy commandments, man can make no commandment unto righteousness regarding it.

Our current events may not include wrestling over foods we put into the body, but our world is consumed by the wrestling over putting scientific tools into the body. And this wrestling is so near and dear to us that you all know there are vast differences of opinion even among brothers and sisters in Christ, even different opinions within our own joyful little congregation. So then, how ought this text comfort us and teach us to be of one mind in Christ?

For those of you who have partaken of the vaccines that we have been assured were created ethically (Pfizer/Moderna), no one can tell you that using them is sinful. You are not defiled before God, nor may be condemned by your neighbor for putting into the body this form of daily bread. For those of you who have abstained from the vaccine because your conscience is burdened by its uncertainties, you may be comforted by the truth that – if

daily bread entering your body is not a matter that leads to defilement, then neither is it a matter that leads to righteousness – thus the one who abstains is not defiled. The refrain commonly heard around the world right now (even in a four-minute add put out by the Papacy last week) that “the loving thing to do for your neighbor is to get this vaccine” implies it’s “the (only) loving thing to do”... that – if you don’t – you do not love your neighbor and have thus defiled yourself before God. Bad theology, which itself defiles before God! Is it a way of loving your neighbor? Sure! But it is not the way to love your neighbor. One who abstains may love and desire to safeguard his neighbor just as much as one who partakes.

Provisions for the body, to be put into the body, may not in and of themselves defile you before God. Nor do they make you righteous before God. Thus, they may not be mandated upon the Christian, nor must the Christian refrain – unless they are made by government fiat no longer a matter of individual choice, but now a mandate unto righteousness!

But, if they cannot be mandated unto righteousness, then no Christian may judge another in individual decisions to make use of this (or any other) form of God-given daily bread. The one who uses it is not being faithless towards God’s protection; and the one who doesn’t use it is not being unloving of neighbor. The

latter may love his neighbor in various forms – attempting to stay healthy in other ways, caring for the sick, even enduring the illness for a natural immunity that then benefits his neighbor. And the **former** (who has used this form of daily bread) may do so in faith that God abundantly provides also through ethically-performed scientific tools.

But, if it is not a question of the vaccines (or any other form of daily bread) going into the body, it is a question of our heart's doubts about or desire to be independent from God's holy will...

The one who abstains from the vaccine might do so not out of faith in God's care for one's body but out of arrogance and pride, putting God to the test or looking down upon the neighbor and his concerns. Oh, how wretched are we when viewing our standing before God as so certain we ought challenge His promises, or when seeing our relationship before God as so individually-vertical as having no relation to our "horizontal" love of neighbor! If that is the condition of your heart, repent!

The one who is afraid of the virus might tremble in his heart that God can't or won't protect him, that God **cannot** handle this situation without the experts... and so that one flees to the vaccine, not out of faith, but out of fear. How equally wretched are we when *fearing* God's call to receive his divine gifts

during a pandemic while *rejoicing* at the experts' call to receive their scientific gifts during a pandemic! If that is the condition of your heart, repent!

In either the one who abstains or the one who makes use of the daily bread, Christian *freedom* must not be abused by the heart to become un-Christian *faithlessness*.

Consider our Old Testament reading, in which the Lord impresses upon His people that His commandments, and *only* His commandments, will be beneficial – not unto *salvation*, but for daily life! He says to them, “You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God... Keep them and do them, *for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who... will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’”*

“And”, the Lord continues, “what great nation *is* there that has statutes and just decrees so righteous as all this law that I set before you?”

Indeed, what nation under heaven does *better* in *unfaithfulness* than it does in following God’s will? Is it coincidence that the society in which we live has renounced the Ten Commandments’ place in civil affairs and now our empire totters in fragility because of the new statutes and decrees of

moral righteousness it has made – such horrible new commands regarding marriage, sexuality, and sexual identity; regarding the murder of the defenseless at the beginning and end of life; regarding borders of vocational responsibility turned into open roads of chaotic irresponsibility; regarding the indoctrination of our children in godless lies and philosophies dubbed ‘education’; regarding even new decrees and mandates over your own body.

And now, what nation of the earth looks upon us and says “surely, this great nation is a wise and understanding people”? And why has our daily life society fallen so far, but because the heart had no fear, love, and trust in God, but only pride in self, dependence upon self, and thus hysteria over what self cannot control.

Of course, the nation of Israel to which God speaks in the Old Testament is not meant to teach us foremost of America, but of the Church. Indeed, will the Church live in Christian *faith* or unchristian faithlessness... in fear, love, and trust in God, or in pride of self, dependence upon self, and thus, hysteria over what self cannot control?

The heart’s fears and pride can wreak much havoc – not only in the situations now foremost on our mind – but in all of daily life: fears, doubts, unbelief, anger, cynicism, envy, bitterness. Isn’t that what Jesus says in our text: it’s what comes out of the

heart that defiles a person...and look at the examples he uses: all from the second table of the Law – evil thoughts (8th commandment), sexual immorality and adultery (6th commandment), theft (7th commandment), murder (5th commandment), coveting (9th & 10th), wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness – all matters that flow from the heart, all matters regarding our *daily life living* under God’s Holy Will.

As the prophet says, “the heart is deceitfully wicked; who can know it?” And, even all the way back in Genesis, the Lord “saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” And you know what the very next verse in Genesis says? It reads, “And the Lord was sorry that he had made man.” That doesn’t mean the Lord blamed himself. The word for *sorry* would better be translated “sorrow.” The Lord had sorrow over his creation, what man’s sin had done to it... and how completely corrupt was man’s condition.

And that would be what the Lord saw of us, too, if He forever looked upon the righteousness of our heart. That would be the sum total of what you could offer to God and say, “Look, here, Lord, here is my righteousness. Here is why you should be pleased with me!” Because of *this*, this wicked heart, and all the

evil things it harbors and pours forth – both upon neighbor (daily life, second table of the Law) and upon God, in faithlessness of God (first table of the Law, as the heart does not fear, love, and trust and therefore does not call upon his name nor rest in the divine Sabbath the Lord provides). Indeed, of us, too – if we said, “Come, Lord, judge my righteousness and see how holy I am”... over us, too, the Lord would have sorrow. That would be our lot, too, *if* God did not go to work on our behalf!... if God did not save us by His grace!

But, He has! He has worked on our behalf in history and come into our own flesh and blood to redeem that flesh and blood and – more than that – came with his pure, righteous heart to redeem our defiled heart. Christ came into this world to go to the cross for you, but not without first teaching and humbling the pride and foolishness of the hypocrites and all who believe they do not need Christ’s righteousness. Think of how often Jesus dismissed the claims of defilement the teachers of the Law threw at him: not just here, in the eating of foods... or in last week’s text, in the washing of hands, cups, vessels and other ceremonial baptisms... but also, when he showed the inconsistency of the hypocrites’ arguments, saying, “John came neither eating and drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man comes eating and drinking and they say, ‘Look at this glutton and

drunkard, a friend of sinners!” And again, most famously, Jesus rebuked the devil, “Man cannot live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God!”

Indeed, how often Jesus taught us that the matters of daily bread do not defile, nor do they make righteous. Rather, the heart need look elsewhere. It need look to a different salvation, a salvation it has in Christ Jesus... who, having taught and eaten and drunk and healed disease and raised the dead and commanded over all the things that affect the body... after that, He went to the cross to there provide his perfect holy righteousness as a substitute for all the sins that spring from your heart and exhibit man’s complete lack of righteousness. There, on that altar, he laid down not ‘daily bread unto righteousness’, but he laid down the offering of his perfect heart and precious blood for the whole world’s *atonement*.

And, as that divine sacrifice – delivered right to us *not* through a ceremonial baptism, but a baptism of regeneration... and *not* through daily bread, but through the living bread that comes from heaven – as that divine sacrifice of Christ gives us a clear conscience before God, its righteousness also informs and teaches the very heart it has regenerated.

It is not suitable for one who now belongs to Christ to now live as though the defiling heart is still to be his natural joy. Have

you not been baptized with the washing of rebirth *and renewal*? The *rebirth* gives you the New Adam, a new heart. The *renewal* addresses the Old Adam, restrains him, subdues him, drowns him, kills him. So it is that our hearts may now rejoice in desiring all that is in Christ's heart. Does Jesus not say, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water!" That is first and foremost the picture of Christ's own heart, as the waters of life flowed from his heart and out of his pierced side.

But, if this is true of the Christ, it is also the joy of the Christian. Our hearts are no longer burdened with fear and doubt and bitterness and envy, all which lead to ungodly decisions even by way of using or abstaining from godly daily bread for all the wrong reasons. Rather, our hearts now may live in joy and confidence and certain hope in our Christ, so that we may use daily bread rightly or abstain from it cheerfully ...and set our eyes on our true and eternal home, even as Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and *his* righteousness, and all these (daily bread) things shall be added unto you."

Defilement need not be our concern when we have Christ and his righteousness. We need not cower in the lies and deceitfulness and uncertainties of this world's self-righteousness; but, as Paul says "stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of **truth**, and having put on the breastplate of **righteousness** (yes,

how bullet-proof is any breastplate that baptismally bears the name of Christ the righteous One!) ... “*and* [Paul concludes] having the readiness (a readiness for daily life) given by” – by what? Not the laws that burden the heart, but “by *the gospel of peace.*” That’s Christ’s gospel; that’s *your* peace.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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