

Lately, we've spent considerable time discussing food, particularly bread. As we move beyond the discourse on the bread of life, our focus shifts from specific types of food to the broader issues related to it. This morning, our focus is on purity. In ancient times, purity wasn't just a marker of one's social standing; it was also a way for Jews to express their devotion and love for God.

Scripture frequently references purity, with one of the most famous examples being the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the Pharisee avoids helping the injured man to maintain his ritual purity. Jesus often addressed issues of purity, not just through parables but through his interactions with people, such as the woman who suffered from bleeding for twelve years and those afflicted with skin conditions like leprosy.

Today, we don't often speak of purity in the same terms. Instead, we emphasize cleanliness or hygiene, concepts that are ingrained in us from a young age.

Nolan, though still young, is starting to grasp the importance of routine. For example, he loves his evening bath so much that he crawls towards the tub at the sound of running water. After his bath, he enjoys a couple of books, gets fed, and then, we hope, settles down for the night. Your prayers in this regard are greatly appreciated.

I think we can all relate to this familiar routine, which often starts with a simple question: When it was time to eat, what would your parents always ask? "Did you wash your hands?"

It's funny how often I would confidently say "yes," only to be caught when they asked to check by smelling them. Even from a young age, we have a bit of a rebellious streak, don't we? "Did you wash your hands?"

Recently, I've spent quite a bit of time discussing the law. Yet, here we are again staring into the mirror. The law confronts us with things we may not want to do but are required to do anyway. I suspect that being told to wash our hands as children was likely one of our earliest experiences with the law.

What's crucial to remember about the law—and this is a very Lutheran perspective—is that God gives the law to maintain good order. However, when the law becomes a means to reach God, something we rely on to bridge the gap between us and God, it turns into a tool that reveals our human limitations.

In today's Gospel, Jesus challenges the Pharisees and scribes. He's essentially calling them out for putting human traditions above God's intentions. Jesus is frustrated because they prioritize ritual practices over the well-being of people. He's pushing back by asking, in essence, "Is it more important for people to be clean, or for them to be fed?"

Sadly, Jesus' opponents often choose the former, and in doing so, their well-meaning traditions become obstacles rather than aids to true spiritual life.

It's certainly important for people to strive for purity and cleanliness, especially before eating, but that's not always everyone's reality. The purity laws were so restrictive that while a healthy man

might be able to maintain purity, those less fortunate—like someone suffering from leprosy—had no chance. The strict human rules laid down by the Pharisees and Scribes effectively condemned people like that, leaving them with no way to achieve purity and, consequently, leaving them to starve.

This is why Jesus confronts his opponents with the words of the prophet Isaiah: "You honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me." By quoting Isaiah, Jesus is trying to help them understand that God's ways are not human ways and to warn them that the line between the two often gets blurred.

Here's where we can clarify things a bit, and it brings us back to the law.

The law functions like a mirror, reflecting back the parts of ourselves we'd rather not see. It reveals the truth and forces us to confront who we really are.

There's a theologian who compares the sermon to a surgeon's scalpel. Sermons are meant to cut deep and expose our inner selves, and the law does exactly that. More to the point, as we've all seen recently, the law, or any command, often goes down like vinegar. When we're told we must do something, we naturally resist. It doesn't matter if we're talking about wearing masks or any other mandate—we just don't like being told what to do. It's human nature, just like a child who resists washing their hands. And even more, we don't like facing the truth about our own flaws.

The word "mandate" might be a hot topic right now, but as Lutherans, we're familiar with it—it's the law: Have no other gods, don't take the Lord's name in vain, honor your father and mother, don't murder, honor the Sabbath, don't steal, don't covet. These are all mandates, and they would condemn us if not for God's grace. They expose the imperfect nature of our human condition.

And this is where Jesus comes in. The entire reason for Jesus' coming was to address our imperfect human situation, where we were condemned and bound by the power of sin.

Whether we realize it or not, we often find ourselves rebelling against authority. From the moment we're capable of defiance, we start, and it often begins with something as simple as washing our hands.

So, what's the good news here? The bad news is that we defy God; the good news is that we are forgiven. But forgiveness doesn't exempt us from the responsibility to examine ourselves. While I don't have all the answers for society's challenges, I do have some theological insights for the church. Today, we face the uncomfortable possibility that we might share more with the Pharisees and Scribes than we'd like to admit.

As a church, we must ask ourselves: Are we perpetuating the same restrictive culture that Jesus critiqued? I'm not saying we are, but it's worth considering. Are we placing human traditions and expectations above God's will? Are we more concerned with how people appear in church—whether they wear jeans or a suit, whether they are clean or disheveled—or do we welcome people as they are?

The law, while often seen as a burden, actually reveals areas where we, both individually and as a church, can grow. Not as a way to earn righteousness or a ticket to heaven, but as a path toward spiritual maturity and deeper faith. Today presents an opportunity to examine ourselves and to thank God for the forgiveness that allows us to acknowledge our missteps. We've all had

moments where, like the Pharisees and Scribes, we've been preoccupied with the wrong things, whether at church, home, or work.

It's like the classic scenario where dishes pile up in the sink, and one spouse gets upset. The argument that follows isn't really about the dishes; it's about something deeper, something unresolved. In the same way, the law confronts us with our shortcomings so we can address the underlying issues.

Jesus was trying to get the Pharisees to look beyond the surface issues to look beyond the dishes, but they took offense.

There's a story about a parishioner who went to their pastor and said, "I'm lying in bed, not sure if I'll make it through this, frightened and worried. And yet Jesus seems to be suggesting that I should single-handedly fund the church's food ministry? As sick as I am, I thought others should be looking after me, not the other way around." The pastor asked, "And how did Jesus respond?" The parishioner replied, "Well, as far as I can tell, Jesus didn't care about my excuses. What did I think I was getting into when I was baptized?"

That's a powerful question.

Remember last week's Gospel where Jesus talked about how his teachings can be offensive? Some of the disciples left him because of this. At the end of that lesson, Jesus asked Peter, "What about you? Will you leave too?" And Peter responded, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." In that simple phrase lies the answer to everything.

When I'm uncertain, I ask, "Lord, to whom shall I go?" When I question whether the world's ways align with God's, "Lord, to whom shall I go?" And when we're caught in the midst of conflict and frustration, grappling with mandates, laws, and rules, we turn to Jesus, for he alone has the words of eternal life.

In that truth, all human constructs fall away. In that truth, we find freedom. In that truth, we are assured of God's grace and presence in our lives.

Friends, this week, let's take a close look at our souls. Even when it feels like God is distant, Jesus is right there, reminding us of what truly matters—loving others as God loves us. Go forth this day with the assurance that you don't have to be perfect. Go forth knowing that you are set free, and in that freedom, you are empowered to serve others.

Amen.