

## Homily 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Yr B: Sin Begins in the Heart

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In our Gospel today the Pharisees and scribes confront Jesus, demanding to know why Jesus' disciples do not wash their hands before they eat their meals.

Under the Old Covenant, the Law of Moses, there were all kinds of dietary restrictions - certain foods that the Jews could not eat. We find these dietary laws set forth in the Book of Leviticus.

At the time of Jesus, the Jewish leaders, the scribes, and the Pharisees – who were the teachers of the law, added things to the Law of Moses, like the purification of cups and jugs and kettles – and being very thorough in washing their hands before eating food.

Jesus criticizes them, saying that they care more about these man-made laws than the commandments of God.

Then Jesus goes on to proclaim something that truly astounds all his Jewish listeners: He says that nothing that enters a person from the outside, like food, has the ability to defile a person, but *“only things that come from within people – from their hearts – are what defile.”*

Why does Jesus here refer to things coming from “the heart”? I'll discuss that in a minute.

But first, I'll explain why the Jews were astounded at what Jesus said about foods not defiling a person.

Chapter 11 of the Book of Leviticus sets forth a whole list of foods that for the Jews were unclean and they were prohibited from eating; e.g., pork. Jews today still abide by this teaching.

The Jews took this prohibition on eating unclean foods very seriously. We see a powerful example of this in the Old T. book, 2 Maccabees, ch. 7, which describes how the Greek king, in the second century before Christ, tried to force the Jews to abandon their religion, and commanded them to eat pork.

An entire family, consisting of seven brothers, chose to die rather than defile themselves by eating pork. They were brutally put to death, one by one.

To the brother who first refused, they cut out his tongue, scalped him, then cut off his hands and feet, after which he was roasted alive.

One by one, they did the same to the other six brothers, as their mother cheered them all on.

This gives one an idea of how seriously the Jews adhered to their dietary laws.

It was within this historical and cultural setting, that Jesus makes this revolutionary statement to His Jewish listeners: *“Hear me, nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but only things that come from within people, from their **hearts**, are what defile.”*

Why does Jesus refer to things coming from “the heart”?

Because according to biblical anthropology, the heart is a primordial symbol, which means it represents ***the interior center of the person*** – wherein takes place a person’s thinking, willing, emotions, and wherein lies a person’s conscience.

This is a truth that is recognized by all peoples of all cultures.

After astounding his listeners with these words, Jesus goes on to list a whole litany of sin which emanate from within, from the heart.

The Gospel of St. Mark, which we read today, was originally written in Greek. The precise meaning of Greek words for the sins Jesus lists help us to better understand the sins.

Jesus begins His list of sins “from within, from the heart” with “evil thoughts.” The Greek word is **dialogismoi**: evil thoughts, evil designs. Why does Jesus begin with this? Because every *outward* act of sin begins with an *interior* act of choice, of exercising one’s free will.

A sin is more than just a bad thought. An evil thought, when it first comes, is just a temptation. Once we reflect on the thought, and realize what we are

thinking, we have to make a choice with our free will, whether to freely continue to entertain the thought, or cast it away.

When tempted, it is always best to pray. As I always tell people in confession, you can't sin and pray at the same time.

Recall that Jesus instructed His Apostles, *"Pray, that you may not enter into temptation"* (Mt. 26:41); and in the Our Father prayer, we petition God, *"Lead us not into temptation."*

If we knowingly and freely consent to an evil thought, we sin, even if we have not yet acted on the thought; this is precisely why Jesus says, *"If you look at a woman lustfully, you commit adultery in your heart."* (Applies to women too!)

If we then knowingly and freely **act** on the thought, and carry out an evil deed, we sin to an even greater degree. E.g., if in our heart we desire to commit adultery, that's bad; if we carry out the act, that's worse.

Next on Jesus' list of sins comes **"unchastity"** – the Greek word is **porneiai** (from **porneia**, from which we get the word pornography) – literally, fornications, which has a broad connotation, meaning every kind of sexual sin.

Then comes **"theft"**; in Greek, **kleptes** (from which we get kleptomaniac) – a deceitful, dishonorable crook; someone who would rob you blind.

**Murder** is next: the unjust killing of an innocent human being (killing in self-defense or the state administering the death penalty for a horrible crime is not murder); then **adultery** (we know), after which is **"greed"** – **pleonexia** in Greek, which means the disordered love of having more and more.

This is followed by **"malice"** – in Greek, **poneros** is a person who in his heart desires to harm, to inflict evil on someone else. We sometimes read about malicious acts or crimes, done by malicious people.

Next comes **"deceit"** – **dolos** in Greek, which means crafty, cunning, deceitful, treacherously clever.

**Licentiousness** is next on Jesus's list - from the Greek word **aselgeia**, which the Greeks used to describe someone who is unwilling to accept discipline, one who acknowledges no restraints, has an attitude of wanton insolence; one who resents all discipline and who knows no shame, is shameless about his evil acts.

Jesus next lists **envy** – which from the Greek literally means “the evil eye”; i.e., one who looks on the success or happiness of another with such wicked intent so as to cast an evil spell on another if one could.

**Blasphemy** - from the Greek **blasphemia** - directed toward another human being means an insult; but aimed at God means blasphemy (e.g., using God's name in vain). Basically, blasphemy means insulting man or God.

**Arrogance – huperephania** in the Greek - literally means “showing or putting oneself above”; pridefully holding everyone else in contempt, except of course oneself. Pride is the first among the seven deadly sins, is really the root of all sin. Whenever we disobey God, we literally put ourselves above God; we tell God, “I'm doing things my way instead of your way, God.”

The last on Jesus' list of sins that begin from within the heart is **folly** – **aphrosune** in Greek This refers not to a lack in common sense or normal prudence, but to moral folly – someone who has a carefree, dismissive attitude toward the Commandments and the moral teachings of Jesus.

This teaching of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in today's Gospel is a summons to look deep within our own hearts, to honestly examine our conscience and ask: “Lord, am I failing in any areas of my life?” “Am I truly loving You, Lord, and my neighbor, with all my heart and mind soul and strength?” “Am I a doer of the word of God, or only a hearer of the word, deluding myself?” (cf. *James*)

After examining our conscience, let us honestly and humbly confess our sins.

Finally, let us pray that we may, as St. James exhorts in our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading, “*keep ourselves unstained by the world, pure and undefiled before God, by humbly welcoming the word that has been planted in us and is able to save our souls.*”