



All this talk of hand washing and cup washing and bowl washing in today's Gospel doesn't have anything to do with hygiene or good manners. This custom of the Jews of Jesus' time had a religious significance. These were religious purification rites. The washing of hands and cups and bowls was supposed to be symbolic of the moral purity of the person.

The problem was, as Jesus so clearly pointed out, that these Pharisees and Scribes were obsessed with these external actions. But the Pharisees and Scribes addressing Jesus were evil inside – adulterous, greedy, full of malice. So here are the Scribes and Pharisees condemning Jesus' disciples for not washing their hands while they themselves are full of filth on the inside. This is why Jesus calls them hypocrites.

This scene gives us a chance to reflect again on what's going on inside of us and the purity of heart to which the Lord is calling us.

We know that we are all born into original sin – inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve. There are a lot of things that this means for us, but I want to highlight just two:

1. It means that when we are born, we are not children of God; rather we are children of Adam, of sin.
2. It means that within our flesh is a tendency toward evil, an inclination to want to do evil – we call this concupiscence.

Now, when we are baptized, because of what Jesus did for us on the cross, the guilt of original sin is taken away – by our baptism we are no longer children of sin, but we become in Jesus true children of God – what a gift!

Secondly, by our baptism God gives us the power not to have to be slaves to our sinful inclination, not to have to be slaves to concupiscence. We are given the gift to grow in goodness, to grow in the freedom of choosing good all the time.

But notice what I didn't say: I didn't say that concupiscence, that sinful inclination of ours, is taken away by baptism. I said that because of our baptism we no longer have to be slaves of that sinful inclination. But that sinful inclination still remains in us. We all know that. We experience it every day – that urge we have to gossip, that urge we have to be lustful, that urge we have to be greedy and so on.

Of themselves, these urges are not sinful, they are just there – they are temptations. They become sins for us when we freely give in to them – in action or desire. In action – we know

what that means. In desire means that when these temptations cross our mind then go the next step and really choose with our will to want them – even if we don't follow through with our actions. This is what defiles us from within, Jesus says, when we give in to our sinful inclination in deed or desire by our free choice.

Again Jesus' words: "From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, un-chastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile."

So what are we to do? What does God want to do?

God wants to restore us, cleanse us and purify us.

First of all, if we have sinned, He wants to cleanse us by His mercy through our repentance. Above all, He gave us the great sacrament of confession by which we are completely cleansed of our sins, especially those that are serious.

Secondly, He wants continually to remake us inside, to strengthen our desire for goodness, for holiness. He pours out grace continually upon us to change our hearts, to help us to let go of our slavery to sin through prayer and especially the Eucharist.

But we have to do our part too. And what is our part? Our part is obedience to the commands of God. In the first reading God tells the Israelites, "Obey and you will live." This is for us too.

Why do we need to obey? Because, in the weakness of our sinful inclination, we can fool ourselves into thinking that things that really are sins are not sins. We can be blinded in some areas of our life and so we must simply be obedient to God's command until He gives us the grace to see. This is a form of trust in God.

By our obedience God can then work to root out sin in our lives. Thus, it is so important to know church teaching – especially on morality – so that we know the path to follow. This is especially true regarding the 6th Commandment regarding sexual sins, to know what they are, to accept what God says about them. Out there in the world, as we all know, it is a free-for-all. The truth can be found for us in God's command, in the teaching of the Church.

What does this lead us all to? It leads to freedom, peace, the joy of being a free child of God, goodness and holiness. It leads us to heaven, where we will be perfect in love and goodness. It starts today with God's power to change us and with our every choice to be obedient to God, that His power may be effective in us.

The Lord desires cleanness of heart for all of us, for only this will bring us true peace and freedom.

**Fr. Mark Gurtner at St. Anthony de Padua, South Bend
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