



Sermon Growth Guide

September 21, 2025

Purity

Mark 7:14-23

Key Verse: Mark 7:15 “Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

Big Idea: Purity is a matter of the heart and there is only one who can make us pure.

Foundations

There’s something universally satisfying about restoration. Whether it’s a YouTube video of a rusted car being renewed, an overgrown lawn trimmed back, or a house deep-cleaned, we’re drawn to “before and after” transformations. That longing for wholeness runs deeper than we realize—it points to the ache in our souls to be made clean.

In Mark 7, Jesus faces criticism from religious leaders about ceremonial purity. They worried about outside behaviors—washing, eating, appearances. But Jesus flips the script: the problem isn’t what goes into the body, but what comes out of the heart. He names envy, greed, arrogance, lust, slander, and more—not just actions, but attitudes that defile us. His point? The real contamination runs deeper than the surface.

Our culture still lives with categories of clean and unclean: corruption is “dirty,” politics can feel “toxic,” people get “canceled” for being morally tainted. We try to cleanse ourselves through diets, achievements, image management, beauty, even religion—but none of it restores us at the core. The good news is that Jesus came not just to clean up our behavior but to purify our hearts. Like a master restorer, He takes what is blemished and makes it whole. We can’t remove the stain of sin on our hearts, but He can—and has. At the cross, Jesus bore our impurity so we could be renewed, forgiven, and set free. Our invitation is simple yet profound: to confess, to receive His cleansing, and to live restored.

Understanding God’s Word

Read Mark 7:14–23 together. What do you notice about Jesus’ teaching that surprises or challenges you?

Jesus says what defiles us is not from the outside but from our hearts. How does this inform how you view purity and holiness?

Applying God’s Word

Share about a time when you tried to “clean yourself up” (spiritually, morally, emotionally, or even physically). What did you learn from that experience?

We often carry “chains” of shame, guilt, or sin (like Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol*). What “chains” do people in our community feel weighed down by?

How can this group help remind each other of Christ’s restoring power?

Read Psalm 51:10. What would it look like for God to “create a pure heart” in you this week?

Witnessing God’s Word

Our culture still uses purity language—things are “toxic,” “dirty,” or “sleazy.” Where do you see people around you longing for cleansing or renewal?

How might we talk about Jesus as the one who restores and makes us whole in a way that connects with those cultural longings?

I had a realization this week. My social media feeds are filled with restoration work. I'm constantly watching videos of people who will find an old piece of furniture on the side of the road or garage sale, refinish it, and then sell it. I follow a guy who clears overgrown lawns, and another guy who power washes things! And I sit there watching it! It sounds silly, but I know I'm not alone in this. Some of the most popular videos on social media are of people cleaning! Jessica Tull is a YouTuber with over half a million subscribers. Her entire channel is just videos of her cleaning her house. ... Really.

You can watch her wash floors, scrub toilets, fold laundry. Sometimes, a child will wander into the video, otherwise it's just 60-minute videos of her cleaning, and some have over 150k views!!² There's something incredibly satisfying about watching a thing go from complete mess, overgrown, dirty, disheveled, broken, to restored, thriving, whole, fresh. This is why shows like the "Biggest Loser" and Home Renovation shows have been so popular. We love watching transformation from broken or unhealthy to restored.

I think we're drawn to this, in part, because we long for our own lives to be renewed, refreshed, and clean. We're in a series called, "How to Get What You Want." Last week Pastor Tim reminded us of St. Augustine's concept of "rightly ordered loves." We need to pray, "God, make me want what you want me to want! Make me love you above all things and love other things in the right order of priority." ... Because... The right desires, in the right order... that is a recipe for success.

Today we're focusing on Purity. What comes to mind when you think about purity? Is it a negative term? Positive term? Maybe quaint? Antiquated? Prudish? The Bible often uses the term "purity" in reference to ceremonial clean-ness which was a huge issue for ancient Jews. Similar to how we engage in physical practices today like in-person worship, fasting, kneeling, raising our hands in worship, tithing, etc. to orient and re-orient ourselves spiritually, Jews had a very clear system that helped them engage with and understand their relationship with God. The Law of Moses (Lev 11, Deut 14) clarified all of the shants and shalls, the dos and do nots as it pertained to ritual cleanliness. For example, eating things like pork, eagle, owl, rat, lizard, etc. were forbidden. These animals were all considered "Unclean" and not fit to eat.

Additionally, if you touched a dead body, be it a human or an animal carcass, you were considered unclean. If you had some kind of bodily discharge or skin disease, or if you came into contact with mold or mildew, all of this would render you ceremonially "unclean." Being "unclean" meant you could not enter the temple, participate in worship, and may have to stay isolated from the community until the purification process had been completed (usually involved some kind of washing, plus a period of time, plus a sacrifice). That's what's being discussed in this passage.

You may be saying to yourself, "That's mildly interesting, but none of this has anything to do with me today." Or maybe you're thinking, "This was all just superstition." Well... not so fast. We as a modern society still have a sense of the categories clean/unclean; pure/impure. We still think in terms of contamination. Psychologist Paul Rozin specializes in studying "disgust." His most famous experiment involved asking groups of participants whether they would be willing to wear a sweater once owned and worn by Adolf Hitler. Participants would regularly say "no." So, Rozin would change the parameters: what if the sweater was thoroughly laundered? What if no one else would ever know that it belonged to Hitler? What if it were sent to Mother Theresa to be worn and sent back? What if the sweater were completely unraveled, re-dyed, and re-knit? The answer was consistently "no." A real-life version of this experiment was lived out about 15 years ago when a Colonel in the Canadian military was convicted of horrifying violent crimes. Rather than take back his uniform and military issued belongings, they chose to burn all of it because of his actions. These are example of strong but irrational feelings of disgust in response to perceived evil. Some may try to dismiss the idea of "sin" as a social construct, but we know that the human mind has an intrinsic category for "Moral Contamination."

We see other examples of this as well. Atheist psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, has developed a "Moral Foundations Theory" showing how secular society wrestles with this concept of purity and cleanness in our language. Americans regularly describe political corruption as "dirty," sex scandals as "sleazy," or racism as "toxic."

We're obsessed with clean eating, keeping the planet clean, of technology detoxes. We've also seen the rise of "cancel culture" in the last decade; the practice of exiling those who are seen as morally "contaminated" from society. We separate

out individuals that we deem morally repulsive, tainted, or diseased. We can see the concepts of clean/unclean, pure/impure alive and well in our culture. I mentioned that Jesus is in a debate with the religious leaders in this chapter. They're debating the origin of impurity, the way in which a person becomes unclean or defiled. What they're NOT debating is whether people are impure or sinful. The religious leaders believed that outside behavior was the most important thing. Jesus knew that the heart was the most important thing. Both asserted that every human being is blemished, stained... unclean. As Presbyterians, we affirm a theological concept called, "Total Depravity." Our Essential Tenets describe it this way:

"God declared that the world He created was good and that human beings, made in His own image, were very good. The present disordered state of the world, in which we and all things are subject to misery and to evil, is not God's doing, but is rather a result of humanity's free, sinful rebellion against God's will... As a result of sin, human life is poisoned by everlasting death. No part of human life is untouched by sin. Our desires are no longer trustworthy guides to goodness, and what seems natural to us no longer corresponds to God's design."⁴

We understand that every aspect of our being is distorted. Our desires, our thinking... everything is twisted and askew. "Total Depravity" doesn't mean that we are all as bad as we ever could be. It means that every part of us is affected. We are totally affected by sin.

This impacts all of humanity. Every one of us is stained, fractured, broken, twisted, fragmented. All of us need restoration, refinishing, renewal, repair, cleansing at our core. Again, Jesus told the Pharisees, "...it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and defile a person." (Mark 7:21b-23) Notice that the list Jesus provides is a blend of actions: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, deceit, lewdness/crudeness, and slander... Actions but also attitudes: greed, malice/hate, envy, arrogance, folly/foolishness. All of these are issues of the heart.⁵ Have any of these things taken root in yours? So, if we are unclean/impure if we have been damaged

and distorted... How can we be restored? How can we become clean? The religious leaders in Jesus's day were reliant on performing the right rituals, the right outward practices. They relied on washing and avoiding unclean foods/people to become and stay "Clean." There's a taco shop down the street that has a spicy green salsa that kind of tastes like what I imagine battery acid tastes like... If I get a carnitas burrito from them and load it up with the sauce. I'm going suffer. But, I can chug Pepto Bismol and wait a few hours to feel restored. That's the kind of thing the Pharisees were focused on. But Jesus has something much deeper in mind.

Rather than thinking about the "contamination" that comes from a spicy burrito, we need to be thinking about Jacob Marley. Do you remember the Jacob Marley scene in A Christmas Carol? He arrives in the night to warn Scrooge about the path he is on. Marley has chains, padlocks, cash boxes that he is forced to wear. He says, "I wear the chain I forged in life... I made it link by link and yard by yard... I girded it on my own free will..." He forged his chain through every selfish action he took, through every dismissive thought about the poor, through every instance where he took advantage of someone. And now, he is forced to carry the enormous chain around in the afterlife. He warns Scrooge that he has forged his own chain, and that, if he doesn't repent and change his ways, he will be in an even worse situation than Marley. We have a sense of this in our own lives, don't we?

None of us want to carry a chain, to carry the burden of sin. We long to be righteous. We try so many things to achieve this. Even non-believers! We try so many things to be purified/clean; to be rid of the sense of lacking/deficiency we fear, to feel like we are "whole / complete." We pursue health and wellness. We try to consume "pure" items: pure water, organic foods, the right supplements.

We try success – achieve / career ladder / degrees / etc. We run towards relationships for a sense of "wholeness." – We even say we're looking for a person who will "complete me." We try politics – We try to be on the "right side of history." We work to align with the right causes, the right hashtags, the right party... We try to curate an image or a brand. We post on social media things that will help posture us in the best way. We attempt to buy the

right clothes, the right cars, the right tech. We pursue beauty as a form of cleansing. We use a growing number of methods to attempt to look like the airbrushed versions of celebrities and models in an effort to hide our imperfections and blemishes. To be accepted and seen as pure. Like the Pharisees, we try religion. We show up, we go through the motions outwardly... we try to “follow the rules,” to live out a form of karma – attempting to have good works outweigh bad actions.

When all else fails, we try numbing feelings of deficiency with various things – substances, endless scrolling, pornography, Netflix, video games, etc. Yet none of these things “work” in purifying us. At worst, they lead us to a place of self-centeredness, manipulation, or depression. At best, to a place of uncertainty. Am I REALLY accepted? Am I REALLY a good person? Can I ever truly know if I am REALLY enough? We again find ourselves asking the question posed by the prophet Isaiah: “How then can we be saved? 6 All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags...” Isaiah 64:5b-6a. How can we be saved? Let me throw a few images at you to see if we can spot the common theme between them. *** Duck with soda plastic on neck... Restored car... Pelican caught in an oil spill...

What’s true about each of these situations? The thing in the picture cannot save itself. The duck needs someone to cut the plastic packaging. The Ford needed someone to painstakingly clear off the rust and restore each piece. The pelican cannot rid itself of the oil that has soaked into its feathers. Friends, we can try all we want to purify ourselves, to become sufficient, to restore ourselves, to make ourselves whole, but it’s not possible. A rusty old Mustang can’t restore itself any more than we can make ourselves pure. So... who can? Who can truly give us the restoration and purification we long for? Over 2500 years ago, the prophet Isaiah foretold of a suffering servant who would come to set everything to right, to remove the brokenness, the failing, the stain of sin from people, by taking it onto himself. This suffering servant would bring peace and healing. (Is 53:4-6) The suffering servant is Jesus.

Peter wrote of Jesus: 24 “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” 1 Peter 2:24 Friends, Jesus came to earth, lived, died, rose from the grave so that you could be restored and

purified. So, you could approach the throne of God’s grace with confidence (Heb 4:16). There is a way for us to be renewed AND here is one who longs to dust us off, to clean us up, to restore us to fullness, to wholeness, to purity. When you turn your life over to Jesus, you are washed clean, and he begins to restore you.

1 John 1:9 says - 8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. The invitation this morning is to acknowledge your depravity, and to ask God to cleanse you, to make you pure.

Maybe you’ve been walking with the Lord for a long time. You’ve already confessed your sin and asked Jesus into your life. Great! We still sin and make mistakes day after day. Rather than dismissing our sin, or drowning in shame, we are invited again and again to confession as the beginning of restoration. We have been cleansed and purified eternally, AND, on this side of heaven we continue to acknowledge our sin and ask forgiveness. So, acknowledge your brokenness before Him yet again. Reorient yourself. Open a new part of your heart to Him today, that he might continue His work in you. Or maybe you’re wrestling with this for the first time or the first time in a long time. Maybe you received a post card in the mail from the “Back to Church Sunday” campaign that’s happening right now and decided to walk through these doors today. If that’s you, if you’ve found yourself longing to be made clean, to be restored, to be made whole, to be purified – there is a way. You can ask Jesus to meet you in your brokenness, and you can be made whole/pure in Him. We just launched an Alpha Course on Wednesday evenings that can help you understand all this (inquire at the Welcome Center). You can talk to a prayer team member after the service. But I’m also going to lead us in a prayer right now. If you’ve hit the point where you realize that success, fitness, relationships, politics, brand-management, external beauty will never fill the gap in your heart, will never make you whole... If you’re ready to take a step towards Jesus, the one who gives full-life, you can pray this with me and open your heart to him today.