

September 1, Ordinary 22B (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

Jesus warns that the real danger lies within our minds and hearts.

by [Katie Van Der Linden](#) in the [September 2024](#) issue

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I get paid to work out. It's a pretty sweet gig. My side hustle is as a fitness instructor because, since I am at the gym so much, I might as well get paid to be there. One thing I have learned as an instructor is that although we can isolate certain muscle groups, we cannot work just one muscle at a time. As we complete a bicep curl, we are also using the tricep, shoulder, deltoid, back, core, and a whole lot of other muscles. We may be lifting with the arm, but many other muscles work to make that arm lift. I once heard it said that if we could isolate just one muscle group, then we would all have chiseled jaws thanks to chewing gum! Contrary to popular belief, the strongest muscle in the human body is not the tongue but rather the masseter, which moves the jaw.

In this week's gospel reading, Jesus calls out a group of Pharisees and scribes who are concerned about religious rules around handwashing. According to Jesus, the larger danger is internal, not external. Physical trauma heals, scars fade, and the pain of a physical injury eventually dissipates. The scars of an emotional trauma, of painful words and slanderous verbal abuse, can be life altering.

But why is Jesus calling out these religious leaders when they are simply being attentive to religious law?

Laws govern society. They keep peace, regulate commerce, and establish ways for people to coexist. Governments, communities, churches, even households have laws established for safety, protection, and education. In our house, we have a rule that kids cannot use their electronic devices until all pets are fed. The kids may not enjoy the rule, but the hungry dog and cats appreciate it greatly. Rules keep peace and cover things that may be forgotten. If my kids did not have a rule about pet feeding, I could have some emaciated four-legged friends.

So what's wrong with enforcing laws, including laws about handwashing? Many households have rules about handwashing. I can picture my mom as one of these religious leaders, asking, "Did you remember to wash your hands before you came to the table?" The religious laws of Jesus' time and place promoted the health and sustainability of the society. Thanks to handwashing, many people lived longer and healthier lives.

But Jesus' criticism is not about washing hands or even about the laws themselves. Jesus accuses his opponents of loving the law more than people, circumstances, and understanding. His followers know the laws and know they have broken them, possibly to make a point to those who hold the law as paramount. But the law is rooted in love. Love results in including and accepting, not denying or excluding. Where he sees separation resulting from the law, Jesus preaches connection. While laws are equipped to evaluate external practices, they cannot judge internal motivations. Jesus wants people to focus on the inside; this is the realm of love. He sees this group of Pharisees and scribes using the law in a superficial way, attending to its external manifestations without paying enough attention to the divine love that underlies it.

What is it that truly hurts, actions or words? Both, but when it comes to lasting impressions, a lot of people don't have strong memories of physical pain from long ago. But people remember the names they were called as children, the statements made in anger that leave lasting impressions. You may forget the bully's name, but you won't forget how the bully made you feel. Jesus indicates in this passage that the real danger is not external, not the germs on our hands or the dirt on our sandals. The danger lies within our hearts and minds. The scars on people's hearts do not heal with bandages and antiseptic. Instead, they often take lifetimes of therapy, trauma rehab, and intensive treatment to work through the emotional scars left by the hearts, minds, and mouths of others.

The tongue may not actually be the strongest muscle, but it can inflict the most damage. Be careful of how you use it, paying particular attention to the thoughts behind the words. Speaking out of rage, jealousy, or fear can have a bigger impact than throwing rocks. Take care of your heart and mind and your words will bring peace, not war. Practice internal health so that the external world is impacted positively by your thoughts and actions. How you feel impacts how you act and what you say. Work on finding your peace so you can create peace around you.