

Clean and Unclean Hearts – Matthew 15:1-20

COVID Washing

Show video of song parodies about washing hands for COVID-19

Six months ago, we had to stop onsite church because of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the things that people did at the beginning of all this was to make funny videos about being in lockdown, physical distancing, and the need to wash your hands. That is because one of the main ways of stopping the spread of COVID-19 is to make sure you regularly wash your hands, especially if you touch the same surfaces that other people have touched. That is why you have to wash, or sanitise, your hands after touching door handles, toilet buttons, touch screens and keyboards, money, and a bunch of other things. Having clean hands is so important that in the *Hygiene and Cleaning* section of the *COVID-19 Safety Plan for Places of Public Worship*, the first area we have to address is about adopting good hand hygiene practices. So, it is a little ironic that on our first week back to onsite church the Bible passage for today starts off with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law being concerned about Jesus and his disciples **not** washing their hands.

Matthew 15:1-2 *Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"*

Right now, more than ever, we are being told that we need to wash our hands, especially if we are going to eat. Jesus and his disciples were not doing this. They were not washing their hands before they ate. So, does this mean that if we want to break the COVID-19 rules and restrictions, then we should do the same thing Jesus did and not wash our hands? Do we just start breaking the rules and go back to doing things the way we used to at church? I mean, if Jesus could get away with it, why can't we?

This is where reading the whole passage is important. We need to try and understand the point of the whole story and not get too side-tracked into other things that are in the story. It would be so easy to just talk about washing hands and whether people should or should not do that. Or you could spend the whole time talking about honouring your father and mother and why that is so important. Or you could talk about food restrictions and what Jews were allowed and not allowed eat. All of these things come up in this story, but they are not what this story is about. So, while we will look at these things briefly, we must not lose sight of the main point of this story. That main point is that everyone is corrupted by sin and we all need to recognise that. This story warns us about how easily we deceive ourselves into thinking we are better than we are.

Ceremonially Unclean

As I mentioned earlier, the story starts with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law being upset with the disciples not washing their hands before eating. Now, while they say they were upset with Jesus' disciples, they were really upset with Jesus, because he was responsible for his disciples actions and he was not making sure they followed the traditions of the elders. And that is the big clue here – the traditions of the elders. Jesus and his disciples were not following their traditions. But what were those traditions and why were they so important?

It all starts in God's Word and how it told God's people how they were supposed to relate with God. If a godly person wanted to be able to go to the temple and worship God, then he had to make sure that he was not defiled by something that would make him *ceremonially unclean* before God. You see, God is a pure God and you could not stand in his presence as an impure, unclean, unholy person. In fact, the Old Testament law said that if you were considered ceremonially unclean, then you could not even take part in everyday life let alone go to the temple and take part in the ceremonies of the temple. That is what it means to be ceremonially unclean. You would have to wait a period of time, or go about cleansing rituals, or make sacrifices so that you were purified and considered clean before God before you could get back to the normal things of life or consider going to the temple.

Now, there were all kinds of things that could make you ceremonially unclean. There were infections and skin diseases, as well as different kinds of discharges from the body which would make you unclean. Coming into contact with unclean things like dead bodies, certain kinds of animals, and unclean people meant that you were considered ceremonially impure. Then there was the big issue of what you ate. There was a long list of the kinds of animals and foods which were considered unclean. People were not meant to eat those kinds of foods and animals. So, the Jews became very careful about what they ate.

Purity Protections

The thing about the Pharisees was that they wanted to be accepted by God. They wanted to do the right thing. They wanted to remain pure and holy before God. So, they followed a set of traditions to help them remain pure. If they were around today, and they saw that the speed limit on Denmark street was 50kph, they might say that you should not go over 40kph. By not breaking 40kph you cannot break the 50kph rule. They believed that keeping their traditions would stop them from breaking God's law. They believed that their traditions would keep them ceremonially pure and clean before God. They believed their traditions would save them. It does not take much to see how keeping their tradition could become more important than listening to God's Word. So, while God's rule was to not eat certain foods which would make you ceremonially unclean, the tradition of the elders said that you should wash your hands to cleanse yourself of **anything** that might make you accidentally unclean. It sounds like a good idea, but notice how Jesus responded to their objection...

Loophole

Matthew 15:3-6 *Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"⁴ For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.'⁵ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,'⁶ they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.*

Let me make a very broad generalisation. Really good lawyers like to study the law, not so they can uphold the spirit of the law, but so they can work out how to make the law work to their advantage. Now, don't forget that it was not only the Pharisees but also the teachers of the law who came to see Jesus. They had found a loophole in the tradition of the elders and how it could be applied to God's law. What they could do was make an official vow which dedicated their food, money, or property to God. It was supposed to be a way of showing

real commitment to God by making sure that God received the best of what you had, rather than say, a debt collector. The crazy thing about this vow was that it did not stop the owner of the food, money, or property from using it for themselves until they were ready to give those things to God. So, it was like they were saying that their property was God's property but there was never a date set when they would have to take that property to the temple and hand it over to the temple treasury. Some believe that they could put that handing over of their goods off until after they had died. So, if an adult child did not want to have to care for their aging parents then all they would have to do was to make an official vow declaring that anything their parents might need is now a gift to God. That then made it illegal for that child to give their parents anything. The Pharisees and teachers of the law, who were so concerned with keeping tradition, thinking that would make them right with God, were willing to use their tradition to trump God's commandments.

The Real Problem

I think Jesus was amazed at their hypocrisy. The Pharisees and teachers of the law thought that God would be impressed by their ceremonial purity. They were outwardly clean before God so they could go to the ceremonies of the temple as ceremonially clean people. Their traditions had helped to protect them from becoming ceremonially unclean. They had placed so much authority into their traditions, which were supposed to help protect them from breaking God's law, that they relied on those traditions, and their ceremonial purity, to bring them close to God. But those traditions could not cover up their moral impurities. Those traditions could not remove the stain of their sin blackened hearts. They thought they were so good, but they deceived themselves. They used their traditions to trump, nullify, and usurp God's commands. They put man made traditions, teachings, and rules ahead of God's Word and so they were no longer listening to God's Word, they were listening to the traditions of men. Imagine thinking that you are a righteous person and but then making it illegal to fulfil your duty to your parents. Making it illegal to follow the 5th Commandment of God's Ten Commandments. Surely, that reveals something of their hearts. You see, the real problem they faced was not ceremonial impurity but their morally corrupt hearts.

Sin is not just about breaking a rule, it is about breaking relationships. Their sin was to make it illegal to follow God's 5th Commandment, to honour their parents. Breaking this commandment breaks down relationships in your family. Caring for your aging parents is not only good for your parents, it is good for the whole family. Grandchildren need loving grandparents, grandparents need loving grandchildren. And if you treat your aging parents poorly then how do you think your children will treat you when you are aging? Sin breaks down our relationships with each other, but more importantly, sin breaks down our relationship with God. These people who thought they were so good, holy, pure, clean, and righteous were still morally corrupt, impure, unclean, sinful people. What this story reveals is that while the Pharisees and the teachers of the law thought they were so good, they were still sinful at heart.

Out of the Heart

Peter asked Jesus to explain how all this worked and Jesus said...

Matthew 15:17-20 "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts-- murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them."

All those years ago, when God gave those laws about mouldy houses, skin diseases, discharges from the body, and eating certain things which would make you ceremonially unclean – those laws were not made so that if you kept them you would be completely right before God. No, they were made to show you that just as it was impossible to be completely ceremonially clean before God, it was also impossible to be morally clean before God. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were fooling themselves by thinking that they were able to remain pure and holy by making sure they kept the traditions of the elders. But they forgot about the deeper issue. They were so worried about what went into their mouth so that they were ceremonially clean, they forgot about what comes out of their mouths which revealed they were morally unclean. One example of what came out of their mouth was their vow to not look after their parents in their old age. That revealed how wicked and morally corrupt they really were. They had all the outward appearances of being good and holy, but they were no better, no cleaner, no holier than anyone else. Jesus warned his disciples to not follow their example. He called them blind guides, who were leading others to their doom. You see, their methods of remaining holy did not work. For all their good works, for all their rule keeping, they still did not understand that they could not save themselves. They needed to go to God for salvation.

Jesus Makes us Clean

I want to move out of Matthew now, to a letter which another disciple of Jesus wrote.

1 John 1:8-10 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. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

We always need to turn back to God's Word. For it reveals who we really are. We must not deceive ourselves and think that we are better than we really are. We must learn from the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, and not focus on human traditions, as important as they may be. We must also recognise the difference between superficial spirituality, which may seem impressive, but it never really gets to the heart of the problem. The heart of the problem is our sinful heart. We have all had evil thoughts and we have all done evil things. This makes us morally impure before God. But if we recognise our sinfulness, if we recognise our blackened sinful heart for what it is, and we confess our sins to God, then he is faithful and just and will purify us from all unrighteousness. We have a Saviour who purifies our blackened sinful heart. That Saviour is Jesus. Turn to him and be cleansed.