

Text: Matthew 15:1-20

Title: Clean Hands *and* a Clean Heart

Truth: A dirty heart makes it impossible to have clean hands.

Date/Location: Wednesday February 23, 2022 at FBC

I. Overall Structure of the Passage

- A. The scribes and Pharisees ask a question, with a criticism built in, about the disciples transgressing the tradition of the elders, 1-2. They were not washing their hands before eating.
- B. Jesus responds with his own question about them transgressing the command of God, 3-6. Notice the same word *transgress* and the very much worse violation of the command of God versus the tradition of men. He briefly explains the question.
- C. Jesus then rebukes their hypocrisy, 7-9.
- D. Jesus explains to the crowd that defilement is not caused by what physically goes into the mouth, but by what comes out of the mouth, 10-11. This is a bit unclear to the disciples.
- E. The disciples interact with Jesus about the fact that the Pharisees were offended by what He said. He charged them to move on (“let them alone”), v. 12-14. The Pharisees were blind and were destined to fall into a ditch, along with all who followed them.
- F. Jesus explains the parable about things going into or coming out of the mouth. The true source of man’s problem is not unwashed hands, but an unwashed heart.

There are two inter-connected thoughts going on in this passage. One is the specific question about unwashed

hands and Jesus's answer to it. The other is the hypocrisy issue of the Pharisees teaching about hand-washing and ignoring the commands of God.

II. Washing Hands or Washing Hearts? V. 1-2, 10-11, 15-20

Read Mark 7:1-5 for a little bit more detail.

- A. What was the tradition, exactly? This and other traditions existed as orally passed-down laws. They did not exist from the time of Moses, but from the Babylonian captivity and synagogue teaching. This oral body of law became the basis of the Mishnah, the written extra-biblical body of tradition held by the Jews. The Gemara is the rabbinic commentary on this body of law, including their back and forth. These together make up the Talmud. So, Talmud = Mishnah + Gemara. You may have heard of the Babylonian Talmud, which is the authoritative version of the Talmud. Their later teaching amplified this concern for cleanliness and took it to new lengths of what most of us would consider absurdity.
- B. Was there a hand-washing law in the Old Testament? In short, there was no such law for before mealtime.
1. For the priests there was an order to wash before they entered the tent or approached the altar lest they die (Exodus 30:18-21). This was a ceremonial cleansing about sin, not about eating.
 2. There was a hand-rinsing order for people who had a strange discharge from their body, lest they pass that physical uncleanness to another person (Lev. 15:11).

This has a ceremonial aspect but seems to have a epidemiological one as well.

3. For an unsolved murder, the elders of the nearest city had to offer a heifer and wash their hands over the body of it, to signify that they had no knowledge of who did the murder, and to make atonement for it (Deut. 21:1-9). This was a symbolic religious act that had to do with sin, and once again, nothing with eating food.
- C. The handwashing that we advocate today has no religious significance at all in common usage because it is meant to reduce the transmission of germs and thus reduce disease and suffering. There is no *religious* connotation of defilement or uncleanness in it. The type of uncleanness we would think of if we saw someone eating with visibly grimy hands would be an uncleanness of being unsanitary, sick, etc. We would have to stretch to say that the Christian principle of maintaining good stewardship implies that we should wash our hands regularly after dirty events or before eating. That *may* be a useful principle, but it is nothing like “breaking tradition” and “sinning” if you do not do it before every snack!
- D. I will add, however, that this desire for germ-cleanness can become an obsession, so that lack of hand sanitizers or insufficient use of COVID masking becomes indistinguishable from a religious fervor because of the other concepts that commonly accompany the pro-mask mindset. Perhaps more commonly such obsessions are caused by irrational fears such as evidenced in obsessive-

compulsive disorders. But again, this was probably not part of the situation in Jesus's day.

- E. I will mention one more thing along this line of thought. The Pharisees were offended that the disciples of Jesus did not wash their hands. The offense caused in the minds of the Pharisees was not a valid offense, because it was based on man-made oral tradition, but it felt serious to them. As Christians, we need to avoid-like-the-plague taking offense over issues such as these, particularly those based on man-made laws and not divine laws. If someone is breaking the law of God, that is something to get excited about. But if they are not following some man-made tradition, cool it! See the other sub-section of these notes for more on that.
- F. After the Lord rebukes their hypocrisy with his own pointed question about their violations of God's law, he explains very plainly in **verses 10-11**: you cannot become religiously "less" by eating certain food. Dirty hands are not sinful. They may be all the hands you have—such as when you go camping or are on a work-site where good hygiene is not available. Dirty hands that make the food dirty is not a sin either.
- G. Rather, it is what comes *out* of the mouth that defiles him. Matthew 12:34: "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."
- H. Jumping down to verses 15-20, we get a further explanation for Peter (representing the other disciples also). The reason that things going in are not sinfully defiling is that you eat them, and the waste is eliminated. They are just "pass through" kinds of things. They pass through the alimentary canal, which is an "external"

passageway through the center of a person's body. Sin cannot enter into a person that way. It is far easier for things to enter through the eyes and ears that promote or incite sin!

- I. The things that come out of a person's mouth ultimately come from the seat of their being, which is called the heart in Greek thought. It is the "mind" in Western thought. In there, where sinful human nature arises, is where there are all kinds of bad thoughts including the origin of the desire and seed of the grossest of sins. *That pre-existing stuff in a person is what defiles him.* Food does nothing of the sort.
- J. As a result, Christian theology teaches that the distinction between Jews and Gentiles has been "washed out" by divine revelation, making it clear that food laws are relegated to the past age when God desired Jews to maintain a distinction between themselves and the Gentile pagans. These laws cannot be enforced upon a group of people who were never given them in the first place, and which laws have no redeeming value whatsoever. Such is the conclusion of Acts 15, based on Mark 7:19 and Acts 10. In any case, the law cannot make a person righteous, neither in times past nor now.
- K. France points out in his NICNT commentary on Matthew (p. 575) that the issue of ritual cleanliness was a problem for all of Jesus's ministry. Many of the healings He did were of people who would be considered unclean in one way or another—a Gentile healed, a woman with a flow of blood, a leper, a dead man in a coffin, etc. Therefore, we see that the Pharisees' objection was related the

Lord's entire ministry, not just to one or the other little things that He did.

II. Text or Tradition? V. 3-9, 12-14

- A. Amid teaching that food cannot defile a person, the Lord rebukes the Pharisees for their Bible-busting traditions. The hand-washing tradition is not the highest on the scale of offenses, however. The Lord points out another that is far worse, and is the sinful, rebellious pattern of all the Pharisaical teachings—the direct violation of the Law of God by means of sophistry.
- B. What is *sophistry*? A quick online lookup reveals this definition: “the use of fallacious arguments, especially with the intention of deceiving.”
- C. What the Pharisees did was to call their law-breaking and fraud by another name, put a “spin” on it, make an explanation for it, and soothe their conscience with this foolishness.
- D. In verse 3-4 the Lord calls them out plainly for breaking God's law. He cites the Law in Exodus 20:12 from the middle of the 10 commandments about honoring father and mother. He then adds Exodus 21:17 where God said that those who curse father or mother shall surely be put to death. If one did not honor their parents, then they were subject to the death penalty. This shows us that God is very serious about the maintenance of familial relationships and the family structure.
- E. I leave a sequential treatment of the verses once again to jump down to **verse 12**. The Pharisees were *highly* offended at his saying. They did not appreciate being called out for their wickedness. It exposed them for what

they really are. At least some, if not all, really believed in their own sophistry. In other words, they were not only deceiving others, they may well have been deceiving themselves. This enraged the Pharisees and became another of many reasons they wanted to eliminate Jesus. He was upsetting their union shop, and they did not like that one bit.

E. **Verse 13:** Being offended at someone calling you out for sin is not a good indicator of spiritual health. It indicates that you are very sick, if not still dead in sin.

After you think about a rebuke for a minute, you should be *thankful* that someone wants to help you by lovingly pointing out an area of needed correction.

The Lord says that those who are offended by His words demonstrate that they are not plants planted by the Father in heaven. In the wheat and tares parable, the Son of Man did the planting of good seeds (Matthew 13:37), and the tares were sons of the evil one. The tares will be gathered up and burned (Matthew 13:40-42). *Uprooted* is the more concise language of 15:13.

F. Furthermore, at some point, people who reject the clear word of God are given over by God to the darkening, death-dealing effects of their depravity and are “let alone” by God. **Verse 14** tells the disciples to mirror this behavior. The people who make sophisticated-sounding arguments for their sin are blind people, claiming to be leaders of others, but only leading them into the pit.

G. Now we come back to verse 5 to the contorted explanation of the Pharisees. “But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother...’” He goes on to explain their sinful reasoning. They have financial resources that

could be used to help their parents. But they “designate” that as a gift to God (Mark 7:11-13) as with a vow or dedication, and then assuage their consciences that they have done a “higher” duty to God and do not have to help their parents. They miss the obvious fact that God would have told them if this were necessary to show devotion to God. But what God actually told them *was* the way to show devotion to God, by being obedient to Him!

- H. The bottom line is that they have undermined God’s command and made it null and void. It has no power over them, which is not why it was given. Did they ever stop to think why God gave that command if He did not mean it, or if He meant it to be overruled by some other thing? Such is the nature of self-deception. It substitutes what “I want” for what “God orders” and goes on merrily to judgment, only to find out, often too late, that it was an eternally fatal mistake.
- I. I have read in the past that this money could perhaps be “laundered” through this mechanism and come back to the priests in another form. But it could also be that they dedicated just enough to the temple to avoid helping their parents if they became estranged from them or angry at them. “I’m not going to help you in your old age; I’m going to give my resources to God’s use and you are out of luck.” This would consign the parents to poverty if they were otherwise unable to earn money and if they had lived somewhat hand-to-mouth over the course of their lifetimes. Undoubtedly, part of such poverty was because of the parents’ investment in their children!

J. In verses 7-9, the Lord summarizes his rebuke by calling the Pharisees hypocrites. They were hypocrites because they claimed to be following God's law, but they were following their own man-made law. This is the nature of hypocrisy: presenting one way and being another.

Being a sinner and repenting, confessing, making restitution, working at avoiding the sin in the future, etc. is not hypocrisy. That is the Christian life. The church is designed for recovering sinners who are getting better, not perfect people. But it is no place for hypocrites—those who pretend to be real but are really fakes.

K. Isaiah wrote about such people in Isaiah 29:13. This was a prophecy—in the sense of a proclamation—to the then-current generation. It is applicable across all generations because it describes elements of human nature. So the Lord could directly apply it to his audience as well.

1. The people proclaimed their loyalty to God. They said they were religious people. They sing to God as if they mean it. They pray (to themselves?). They do rituals.
2. But they were not really with God in their hearts. They were like the back-stabber who says he is with you, but secretly in his heart he hates you.
3. They worship with empty hearts and minds toward God.
4. As a result of their no-relationship-with-God status, they find a need to replace that relationship with other things. Those things come in the form of human commandments that they make into dogma. They elevate their own ideas above God's word and induce

people to follow them. Worship then is really toward the man-made system instead of God who made the men.

5. People may hold for themselves standards that are a bit beyond the edges of Scriptural instruction, and that is not a real problem. But when those are elevated alongside or, often, above the commands of God, the trouble-light goes on immediately. “I believe it is wise to...” is a whole lot different than “It is essential religion to ...” Be discerning about that, and loving toward those who may hold different standards than you do.

L. Applications

1. Do not devise ways around God’s word. Just obey it.
2. Do be watchful for instructions that become replacements for God’s word. In so many religions and faith traditions, man’s word trumps God’s word. That is backward.
3. Caring for aging parents is tough, but that does not excuse us from working at it as best we can. A mother-in-law apartment may be one way you honor your parents. Going over to help them around the house is another way. Helping them manage bills and finances and medical visits and medicine and insurance and the like is another way. Helping them get groceries when that time comes is another way. Helping them in their retirement apartment or nursing home is another way. But washing your hands from them is not cool with God, particularly for “financial” reasons.

3. God does not say to honor your parents only if they are perfect. Work at the relationship so that it is not so strained as to make caring for them an impossibility.
4. Going back to the clean-vs.-unclean food issue, I have learned from traveling that it does not matter where you are, but who you are. Of course there are some sinful places *where* you could go, but that relates more to *who* you are than where you are. But in a similar vein, we can say that it matters far more *who* you are than *what* you eat.

M. The Lord said the Pharisees were breaking the Law of God. We understand that. But what if someone objects to you that the Lord undermined the food laws Himself, and so was guilty of the same thing He was accusing the Jews of? We have to back up a little bit to answer that question.

Why was it sinful to eat certain foods in the Old Testament? The teaching of our Lord in Matthew 15:10-11 and 16-20 indicates that it is not the food itself that was a problem. So what was precisely wrong with eating those foods? Was it that eating was a violation of the command of God even though the “thing commanded” was not a sin to do in and of itself? In other words, the sin was not intrinsic but symbolic? Was it to distinguish the people of Israel from the Gentiles? Was it the association of those foods with the Gentiles and their paganism? Was it that these laws prevented table fellowship (and thus deeper partnership) with pagans? I can affirm some aspects of all the above. Were the laws given for health reasons? I do not believe this, because it

seems to treat the Jewish people as if they were too simple-minded to know how to prepare safe food.

The bottom line is that the food itself was never sinful. It was a for-that-time decree of God that the Jews had to follow to distinguish themselves from the Gentiles and to demonstrate obedience to God. That requirement of distinction is eliminated in the gospel of Christ, and new ways of demonstrating obedience to God are in force.

Conclusion

By the title of my message, “Clean Hands *and* a Clean Heart,” I do not intend to convey that the Pharisees were right about the ritual washing of hands but just fell short. They missed the entire boat. Rather:

“Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has **clean hands** and a **pure heart**, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully” (Psalm 24:3-4).

And: “That the men pray everywhere, **lifting up holy hands**, without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8).

Ritual washing of hands is not the issue. Hands that do not *practice sin* is the issue. A heart first washed by the blood of Christ to break the power of sin and allow the hands to do righteousness instead of wickedness is what is needed. **You must have a clean heart to have clean hands.** The cleanliness of the hands is like in 1 Timothy 2:8 – a farmer with dirty hands out in his fields, but who is a good Christian man, can lift those soiled hands to God in prayer, and do so in complete fulfillment of this Scripture.

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