

5.3.26 Discover the King “Defiled” Matthew 15:10-20

Focus Text

“And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” But Peter said to him, “Explain the parable to us.” And he said, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”

(Matthew 15:10–20, ESV)

1. Purity of the Heart

“And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” (Matthew 15:10–11, ESV)

Matthew 15 is starting to lay out the idea that Jesus cares not just for people's actions but also for their hearts. Now, to be clear, the Greek word for heart symbolizes the inner person. This is more akin to our word for character. Someone's character is the ideals that are lived out in them, even if others aren't around to witness their lives. Jesus is making it clear that the food laws in the Old Testament and the new religious additions meant to symbolize one's purity before God aren't the main focus God desires.

This leads us to reflect for a moment on our own hearts and ask whether our inner person is aligned with what God desires. If the answer is “no,” that is an honesty that God desires to heal and transform. Being a committed follower of Jesus is not a performance meant for others to see. It is a way of life that can only be accomplished when one is born again by the power of the Holy Spirit. One grand mistake that people often make is thinking and behaving as if this is a work that one may achieve on one's own merit. No, it's done through surrender to Jesus. Even the most seasoned Christians have days and moments when they fall short and sin, but the mature believer knows that God forgives, heals, and changes, and that having a heart after God is a relationship, not simply a work.

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“In Matthew 15, hand and plate washing served a religious purpose centered on ritual purity rather than hygiene. The laws regarding purification of the hands were concerned with ritual purity, not sanitation.^[1] This washing did not have the purpose of removing dirt, but had a ceremonial purpose of washing off contamination from touching some religiously unclean object.^[2]

The Pharisees had developed an elaborate system to address a fundamental problem: it was clearly impossible to avoid all kinds of ceremonial uncleanness, as people might unknowingly touch someone who was unclean, and Gentiles in Palestine made even dust unclean.^[3] Good Jews were expected to perform ritual hand washing before, during, and after each meal.^[1] Such washing was not prescribed by Old Testament law, but was a tradition passed down to first-century Jews by their elders, and many teachers gave these human traditions an authority equal to that of Old Testament commandments.^[1]

However, Jesus fundamentally challenged this understanding. What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and defiles a person—evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander—while eating with unwashed hands does not defile anyone. (Matt 15:1–20) Jesus redirected attention from external observance to internal moral condition, arguing that food consumed with unpurified hands does not spiritually defile a person, and the words that come out of one’s mouth defile a person because they show the sinful condition of the heart.^[1]¹

¹ [1] Holman Bible Staff, *KJV Study Bible* (WORDsearch, 2012). [See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#).]

[2] Richard C. Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of Luke 1–11* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 529.

[3] William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), 132–133.

2. The Blind Leading the Blind

“Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.””
(Matthew 15:12–14, ESV)

The Pharisees are offended by this teaching. They have established very strict rules to be adhered to, because violating these rules will cause people to defile themselves before God. However, as Jesus has just shown, they have no problem ignoring their parents and making bold claims to be generous to the temple. The inner and outer persons are different; for many religious leaders in Jesus’ day, their concerns were for public action, not heartfelt devotion. The modern equivalent for us is going to a church building on Sunday morning, but then ignoring all Jesus’ commands after leaving. That isn’t Christianity, it’s a performance. Jesus makes it clear that they are blind leaders, leading blind people, and they will fall into a pit. This metaphor is leading to judgment; the dark pit is damnation away from God. Jesus is implying that they are spiritually blind and wandering away from God’s kingdom into judgment because their lives aren’t what people see; they are hypocrites. As Jesus challenges the leaders and people to walk blindly into destruction for me (as the pastor) and anyone wanting to become a leader in the local church, the challenge is that we as leaders must go first in following Jesus. If we don’t seek the Lord as leaders, people could be led astray by us. Thank you for your prayers for the leaders of the church as we strive to follow Christ so as not to be the blind leaders.

“His watchmen are blind; they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs; they cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber.”
(Isaiah 56:10, ESV)

3. Worry about the Heart

“But Peter said to him, “Explain the parable to us.” And he said, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.” **(Matthew 15:15–20, ESV)**

So Jesus reveals, once again, in a summation of the sermon on the mount, that our actions in the world reveal our hearts (inner person). The idea that food could corrupt a person seems silly to Jesus. You eat and expel food; it's a natural biological action. Contrary to the idea that ritual purity is achieved through specific actions and rituals. Jesus reminds us that God's desire has always been to restore a sinful people and transform their hearts back to Himself. Jesus is reminding us that without the renewal of God, our thoughts will reveal the condition of our inner person. The defilement that Jesus came to save us from isn't eating without washing our hands. Jesus came to save us from the sinful nature corrupting all of us. If the worst activity of humanity was eating with dirty digits, then being crucified would seem to be an overkill. No! Jesus came to be the sacrifice because our hearts without Him lead to all kinds of wickedness. Here, in Mark's gospel, we see Mark's commentary that all food is pronounced clean, because the heart of the food laws was always to help set God's people apart, but the food laws were larger than just action; their unique status in the world was meant to be in relationship with the living God. Now that Jesus is here, the food laws are gone, because we understand the point was to have our hearts turned toward the Lord God in love and respect.

“since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)” **(Mark 7:19, ESV)**

“Jesus's teaching in [Matthew 15:17–20](#) doesn't directly abolish the Old Testament food laws, though it establishes a principle that ultimately leads to their abandonment. Peter struggled to understand whether Jesus was merely challenging the claim that eating with unwashed hands defiled a person, or challenging all the dietary laws of the Old Testament. Matthew focuses on the direct application of Jesus's words in the original context—specifically the matter of eating with unwashed hands—rather than addressing Old Testament dietary laws.^[1] Although the ritual laws of the Old Testament are always subordinate to the moral law in Matthew, Matthew never calls for their complete abrogation for his Jewish-Christian readers.^[1]

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However, Mark’s parallel account includes the editorial comment “he cleansed all foods,” indicating that the food laws no longer apply.^[2] Jesus went beyond merely defending the Old Testament law by laying down a radical principle which would ultimately lead his followers to abandon the food laws of the Old Testament altogether.^[3] The principle itself—that defilement comes from within through evil thoughts and actions, not from external sources—creates the theological foundation for later developments. According to the New Testament, the dietary laws that were based on ceremony and “typology” are no longer binding.^[4]²

- Matthew 5:17–48^[1] contains the core teachings on reinterpreting the law:
- Matthew 5:21–26 — Anger and murder: Jesus extends the law’s prohibition on murder to include anger, calling for reconciliation before judgment^[2]
- Matthew 5:27–30 — Lust and adultery: Jesus teaches that the lustful look is already indicative of adultery, emphasizing the heart’s condition^[2]
- Matthew 5:31–32 — Divorce: Jesus addresses how sinful human beings twist God’s provisions to their own ends through contemporary interpretations of Deuteronomy 24:1–4^[2]
- Matthew 5:38–48 — Revenge and enemies: Jesus leaves the “eye for an eye” limit standing but insists people should not take revenge at all, and extends the law’s command to love neighbors to include enemies^[3]

² Regarding Peter’s reference: The parable refers to the content of verse 11 rather than to verses 12–14.^[5] Peter described Jesus’s teaching in 15:11 as a “parable,” not because it has allegorical elements but because the statement was somehow enigmatic, and Peter was likely struggling to understand the full implications of the statement.^[1]

[1] Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 384.

[2] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2017), 2:169.

[3] Richard T. France, “*Matthew*,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 924.

[4] Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “*Dietary Laws*,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1:627.

[5] Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 488.

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- Additionally, Matthew 15:1–11 contrasts the tradition of the elders with God’s command^[3], and Matthew 9:13 cites Hosea 6:6 (“I desire mercy, and not sacrifice”) to show Jesus prioritizing moral behavior over ritual and ceremonial observance.³

Application

With your cornermen, this week, have a conversation about how you are doing in life. No, just what’s happening on Sunday Morning. A part of being in a spiritual family and having spiritual friends is checking in on one another spiritually. Accountability and confession might feel awkward at first, but their purpose is to help the church watch over one another in love, so that our inner person, as best as possible, matches our outer person. Grab a cup of coffee this week and have a good soul-searching conversation. Amen.

³ [1] Craig S. Keener, “The Sermon’s Ethical Teachings: Living from the inside Out,” *Bible Study Magazine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Faithlife, 2020), 12:2:37.

[2] Peter G. Bolt, *Matthew: A Great Light Dawns*, ed. Paul Barnett, Reading the Bible Today Series (Sydney, South NSW: Aquila Press, 2014), 54–55.

[3] I. Howard Marshall, *A Concise New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 41.