

Matthew 15: 10 – 20

10Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: 11it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” 12Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” 13He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” 15But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” 16Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? 17Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.

**”More Than Following the Rules
Matthew 15:10–20
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La Habra United Methodist Church
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There is an old story about a cowboy camping alone on the prairie.

One morning, he wanted to cook breakfast but discovered that he had no firewood. So he lit the dry grass around him and held his skillet over the flames.

As the wind picked up, the fire kept moving. The cowboy simply walked along, holding his skillet over the burning grass.

It worked—at least for a while. By the time his eggs were cooked, he was nearly two miles from where he had started. Unfortunately, his coffee was still back at camp.

I hesitate to tell this story about a grass fire these days. In the weather we have these days, we know how quickly a small fire can become a serious danger.

But the image reminds me of something that can happen in our spiritual lives.

We can become so focused on what we are doing that we don't notice where we are going. We can be busy doing what we think is right and slowly drift away from what really matters.

That is what Jesus confronts in today's Gospel. The Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus with a question: "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat."

They were not talking about hygiene. They were talking about ritual purity.

The ritual itself was not necessarily wrong. Religious rituals can remind us who we are, connect us with those who came before us, and help us practice our faith. The problem comes when we forget why we have the rituals and traditions in the first place. Something intended to bring us closer to God can become something we protect more than our relationship with God.

That is what Jesus sees. He reminds the religious leaders that they have become so concerned about religious rituals and traditions that they were neglecting God's command to honor and care for their parents. Outwardly, they looked faithful. But something had gone wrong in the heart. So Jesus says to the crowd: "Listen and understand."

Then He says: "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

Jesus takes them beneath the surface. The real issue is not what is outside us. It is what is happening inside us. Jesus says: "For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander."

These are not simply violations of religious rules. They damage relationships. They destroy trust. They wound people who are created in the image of God. That is why Jesus takes us to the heart. Faith is not simply about what we do on the outside. It is about who we are becoming on the inside. And this is where we need to be careful.

It is easy to look at the Pharisees and ask, "How could they have missed what Jesus was saying?" But Jesus is not inviting us to identify who today's Pharisees are. He is inviting us to examine our own hearts. Where have we become more concerned about being right than being related? Where have our traditions become more important than the people those traditions were meant to serve? Where have we become so focused on what we believe that we have stopped seeing the person in front of us?

Jesus does not reject God's law. He brings us back to its purpose: Love God. Love your neighbor. Let God's love shape the kind of people we become.

There is a story told by Henri Nouwen in his book titled The Wounded Healer that helps us understand this point more clearly. A young fugitive once came to a small village seeking refuge from his enemies. The villagers hid him. But soldiers came looking for him and threatened to burn the village and kill everyone unless the man was handed over. The villagers went to their minister for help.

The minister was torn. If he protected the young man, the village might be destroyed. If he surrendered him, one person would die but the village would be saved. So the minister went to his room, opened his Bible, and searched for an answer. Finally, his eyes fell on John 11:50: "It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." These words were spoken by Caiaphas concerning Jesus when they were making the decision to crucify him. The minister took these words as God's answer to his situation. So he told the soldiers where the young man was hiding. The young man was taken away and killed. There was a feast in the village because the minister had saved the lives of the people. But the minister could not celebrate. He sat alone in his room, overwhelmed with sadness.

That night, an angel came to him and asked, "What have you done?" "I handed over the fugitive to the enemy," he replied. The angel said, "But don't you know that you have handed over the Messiah?" "How could I know?" the minister asked. And the angel replied: "If, instead of reading your Bible, you had visited this young man just once and looked into his eyes, you would have known."

It is a haunting story. And we should not misunderstand its message. It is not saying that we should stop reading Scripture. We need Scripture. But Scripture is not given simply so that we can find rules to apply to other people. Scripture is given to transform us. It leads us to Christ. And when we look at Christ, we see the heart of God.

We see Jesus touching those considered unclean. We see Him eating with people others rejected. We see Him forgiving sinners, healing the sick, welcoming children, and noticing people whom others overlooked. We read stories about how Jesus showed compassion and love. That is the heart God wants to form in us. And this connects deeply with our Wesleyan understanding of grace.

We have talked about Prevenient Grace—the grace of God that comes before us, awakening us and drawing us toward God.

We have talked about Justifying Grace—the grace by which God forgives us and restores our relationship with God through Christ.

John Wesley also spoke of Sanctifying Grace. Sanctifying Grace is God's continuing work in us. God does not simply forgive us and leave us where we are. God continues to shape us, correct us, soften our hearts, and teach us how to love. Sanctification is the journey of becoming more like Christ.

Perhaps one of the questions we need to ask along that journey is: “Lord, what have I stopped seeing?” Have I stopped seeing the person who is hurting? Have I stopped seeing the stranger? Have I stopped seeing the person who disagrees with me? Have I stopped seeing the image of God in someone who is different from me?

Jesus says, “Listen and understand.” Look again. Look beyond the rule. Look beyond the tradition. Look beyond your assumptions. Look into the eyes of the person standing before you.

Because sometimes, when we really look, we may discover Christ there. Let us return to the cowboy. He was so focused on cooking his breakfast that he didn't realize how far he had traveled. The eggs were cooking. The fire was burning. Everything seemed to be working. But he had slowly moved away from where he began. Sometimes we do the same thing spiritually.

We can continue doing what we have always done and still drift away from the heart of God. So the question for us today is not simply, “Am I following the rules?”

The deeper question is: “Is my heart being shaped by the love of Christ?” That is the work of Sanctifying Grace. God is still shaping us, teaching us., and calling us deeper into love.

So may we not simply be people who know the rules. May we be people whose lives reflect the heart of Christ.

May God give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts willing to recognize Christ in the people around us. And when we have wandered too far, may God's grace lead us home— back to mercy, back to compassion, back to love, back to Christ.

Because Christian faith is more than following the rules. Christian faith is following Jesus.

Amen.