

Cleanse Our Hearts

Matthew 15:1-20

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We're still looking at being all that God wants us to be. We're praying to be the church and to be individuals that God wants. Reading Matthew some weeks ago and with the prayer to be all that God wants us to be in mind, I saw this section describing part of what that means. Being all that God wants us to be includes having hearts close to God, cleansed by God, and filled with God.

Some Pharisees and scribes have come to watch Jesus and question him. Scribes and Pharisee were a kind of self-appointed spiritual elite among the Jews. Scribes were Jewish scholars who copied the Old Testament Scriptures and became professional interpreters of Scripture. Pharisees were a religious order. They were primarily laymen who devoted themselves to strictly observing the Jewish Law, the Law of Moses. Most scribes were Pharisees, but not all Pharisees were scribes (Robert Mounce, *Matthew: A Good News Commentary*).

In the larger section of the Gospel where this passage appears, we see Jesus as God's Son who acts as the prophets of old and who acts as the Lord of creation (14:13-32). The disciples acclaim him as God's Son (14:33). The crowds approach him for healing (14:3-36). All of this shows how narrow and restrictive the scribes' and Pharisees' perception of Jesus is as they respond to Jesus in such a narrow and picky way (Craig Keener, *Matthew. IVP New Testament Commentary Series*).

The Pharisees held to what was called "the tradition of the elders." This was oral teaching and commentary on the OT Law. The Pharisees saw this tradition as pretty much on the same level as the Law. Other groups in Israel ignored this tradition. We see Jesus and his disciples ignoring it as they eat without first going through the ceremonial handwashing for ritual purification.

The tradition of the elders was a collection of customs and interpretations of the Law intended to help people apply God's Law in every area of life. This particular custom of ritual handwashing was based on

Moses' command to the priests to wash in a certain way. The Pharisees applied this priestly custom to all the people and made it a requirement for the people to be "clean," that is, acceptable and able to participate in religious and social life.

Because Jesus and his disciples weren't observing the tradition of the elders and all its customs, the Pharisees and scribes questioned and attacked Jesus.

Jesus defended his ministry and his disciples by accusing these leaders of breaking God's commandments in order to follow their own tradition. Jesus tells the Pharisees that they have let go of God's commands and have held onto human traditions. Their traditions had replaced God's commands. Then he describes how they had set aside God's commands in order to observe their traditions.

We have to be careful. Our religion or our religious rituals and traditions can become places to try to hide from God rather than means to draw closer to God. We can actually use religion to try to keep God at a distance and avoid a real encounter with the living God. We come up with these extra rules and behaviors that we think will please God. And we end up pretending with God or taking pride in our efforts and looking down on people who don't do like we do. Or we rebel against the rules and end up also rejecting the real life the rules were supposed to point us to.

I have relatives who are part of a "holiness" church. Their emphasis on Christian holiness influenced our whole family. Holiness is a great thing. It means belonging to God and being dedicated to God. It has to do with wholeness and health in our life with God. The problem is that we can substitute rule-keeping for real holiness. Whether it's dressing a certain way or abstaining from alcohol or tobacco or something else, or doing certain behaviors, it's easy to think that's what real holiness is. I remember a little rhyme I learned when I was young: "I don't drink and I don't chew and I don't run with those who do." But if it's all about keeping extra rules, we can pretend to be holy by keeping the rules, but our hearts aren't really changed.

Fred Craddock tells about a girl he went to high school with. She belonged to a church that emphasized how Christians are different. The

women weren't to wear makeup or jewelry. They couldn't cut their hair. They could only wear long skirts and long-sleeved blouses. Fred said it was kind of painful seeing those girls come to school looking like their own grandmothers. But one girl broke away from the group. She went into the girls' restroom and rolled up the waistband of her skirt until it was the same length as everyone else's. She opened the collar of her blouse and rolled up the sleeves. Then she put on some eye shadow and lipstick and pulled back her long hair. She came out of the restroom looking like everybody else. Then, in the afternoon, when the bell rang to go home, she went in there and came out looking like she was expected to look in her church and in her home (*Craddock Stories* 95).

God's calling us to a way of life that's truly devoted to him, not to keeping a few rules here and there or looking a certain way or acting one way around one group and another with another group. Our rules, our appearance become more important to us than God's commands and God's intention.

Jesus gives an example of how the scribes and Pharisees put their rules ahead of God's commands. Jesus points out that the Law of Moses included commands about honoring one's mother and father. But the Pharisees and scribes had a custom that said a person could designate money or property as "Corban" (devoted to God). Whatever someone designated this way couldn't be given to their parents—to help provide for them in their old age, for example. But there were loopholes that still allowed people to use the dedicated property for themselves.

So Jesus shows that these leaders were using their tradition to excuse breaking God's Law. Jesus goes beyond the issue of hand washing and rejects the scribes' tradition, saying that it has no valid claim to represent God's will.

Jesus showed his rejection of this scribal tradition by going out of his way to break their rules. This was a main point of contention between Jesus and the religious leaders. It was one of their main reasons for rejecting Jesus.

Jesus further defends his ministry and his disciples by accusing these scribes and Pharisees of being hypocrites who were like people the prophet Isaiah had denounced.

These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.

It's possible to talk like we're close to God, but in the depths of who we really are to be far from God. Our words don't matter when our hearts are distant from the Lord. One condition of the human heart is that it can be far from God.

Next we see Jesus addressing the crowd regarding what's clean and unclean. He's still responding to the scribes and Pharisees and overturning their teaching.

Jesus tells the crowd that nothing outside people makes them "unclean" by going into them. Instead, what comes out of a person makes them "unclean."

The disciples point out that Jesus offended or scandalized the Pharisees with this teaching. Jesus isn't too concerned about that. He reemphasizes that not everyone who claims to belong to God really does. Not everyone who claims to be a guide for life with God knows where they're going. We need to be careful whom we listen to, whom we follow. And we need to examine ourselves as we try to lead others. Is our heart far from God or close to God? Are we really planted by God or are we pretending to be his?

Peter then asks Jesus to explain what he's talking about when he says that what comes out of a person instead of what goes into a person is what defiles. Let's identify with the disciples and let Jesus instruct us as well.

The reason lack of ceremonial washing or certain foods don't make a person unclean is that they don't go into a person's heart. The reason that what comes out of a person makes one unclean is that these things come out of the heart.

We use “heart” as a figure of speech for emotions, or where emotions come from. In biblical understanding the heart is the core of a person. It may involve feeling, but it’s more about thinking and deciding. Our heart guides our actions. It’s the central point that represents our true humanity. On the deepest level, our heart guides and determines us. Our heart is where our motives arise. Our heart is like the control center for our lives. Sometimes we call it our “will” or our “spirit.”

Earlier, Jesus quoted God’s word through the prophet about the people honoring God with their lips, “but their hearts are far from me.” It’s possible to talk and give the appearance of honoring God, but deep inside, in the source of our thoughts, motives, and decisions, we’re far away from God. We’re removed from God, from his best intentions.

Our physical heart pumps good or bad blood all through our body. Spiritually, our “heart” is infected with sin that spreads and comes out in various ways. Jesus lists ugly symptoms of sin: evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, and slander. These things are unclean. They’re not what God intends. When they spill out from the inside, they make our lives unclean.

This reminds me of some OT passages. First, the “Seven Deadly Sins” from Proverbs 6:16-19—“haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.”

Then there’s this word from Jeremiah, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind...” (17:9-10).

The Lord who knows our heart can change and cleanse our heart and draw it near to himself. “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26).

Jesus makes this change of heart available to everyone. Hearts that are distant from God or full of sin and uncleanness can be brought close and cleansed by God’s grace.

Here in chapter 15, Jesus reemphasizes some of what he said in the Sermon on the Mount. There he said that the pure in heart are blessed, for they will see God (5:8). He showed that we need to do more than avoid murdering someone; we need not to have contempt for that person in our heart. He devotes a good bit of his message there to the importance of our inner attitudes as well our outward behavior (5:21-48). A little later, he says that we can tell a false prophet by the fruit of their lives (7:15-20). Their actions show what's in their hearts just like he says here in 15 that what's in someone's heart is what comes out in words and behavior.

How's your heart? We can search our hearts; we can allow God to search our hearts. If our hearts can be far from God, they can be drawn near to God. If our speech exposes what's in our hearts, what's in there? If evil thoughts and actions come out of the heart, surely goodness and righteousness can fill our hearts and come out in thoughts and actions. Do you have a heart that's far from God or full of impurity? I want us each to have a heart that's close to God, a clean heart that's filled with the life of Jesus and that pours out the loving behavior God wants.

A traditional prayer helps us respond to God's call here:

Almighty God,
to you all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from you no secrets are hidden.
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name,
through Christ our Lord. Amen. (*The United Methodist Hymnal* 6)

Let's look a little closer at that prayer and see what it means.

- We're addressing, we're talking to the true and living God, the God who has power to act and to work in our lives and in the world.
- Every heart is open before God. "People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

- If God knows our heart, God knows all our desires, everything we want, all that motivates us and drives us.
- No secrets are hidden from God. You can't keep anything from God. Mothers always seem to know what kids are up to. God's like that. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13). We might as well be honest with God about all the stuff that's in us since he already knows about it and we can't hide it from him.
- Now we ask God to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts. Not the feelings, but the thoughts. What we think about shapes who we are and what we do. As followers of Jesus, we want thoughts that will shape our lives to be like his.
- God cleanses through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It's like God breathes into us, blows away dirt and debris, and gives new life. Keith Green sang, "Rushing wind blow through this temple/Blowing out the dust within/Come and breathe your breath upon me/I've been born again."
- When God cleanses our hearts, we can love God with all our heart. We choose the Lord, we put God first, we're loyal to him, devoted to him.
- And we can give God the worship and praise that he's due. We worship the One who is worthy.
- All this is through Jesus Christ—his example, his teaching, his death on the cross, his resurrection, his reign, and the gift of his Spirit in us.
- "Amen"—this is the way it is. We're committed to experiencing the reality this prayer asks for and living it in all of life.

God, bless this church. Cleanse our hearts so we can be all that you want us to be in Jesus' name. Amen.