

JESUS AND PURITY

Matthew 15: 1-20

On the surface, today's gospel reading is just about a dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes over the washing of hands, but, like all scripture, when we examine it in more detail we shall find that it has much to teach us. In fact it's quite a difficult passage to fully understand, because Jesus moves progressively from one issue to another widening the scope of his teaching as he does so, so please open your Bibles at page 982 so that you can follow this with me as we study it together.

It would seem that the religious authorities of the day have made a long journey to find out what Jesus is doing – look at verses 1 and 2: “Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!”” (Matthew 15:1-2 NIV).

So the religious authorities, the Pharisees and the scribes, have made the long journey North from Jerusalem to Galilee. Perhaps they came to evaluate Jesus's ministry, although it seems more likely from the petty nature of their comments, they came simply to criticise him and put him down. This is the first time in Matthew's gospel that Jesus has been confronted by opponents from Jerusalem and I'm sure that they didn't make the journey lightly as the Pharisees regarded Galilee as a backward area which was somewhat contaminated – not quite unclean, but nearly so. It's interesting isn't it that Jesus always had more problems with the religious authorities than with sinners and the lost!

Now on the face of it, hand-washing before eating sounds like a good idea, particularly as food was often taken from a common dish, but this wasn't really about hygiene as the hand-washing wouldn't have been very thorough. You held up your hand and poured about an eggcup full of water onto it. If the water dripped down to your wrists, then that was good enough. Also, hand-washing was only a rule

imposed by the scribes and Pharisees, not something required by Jewish Law. The only regular ritual hand washing required by OT law is that of the priests before undertaking their priestly duties (Exodus 30:18–21; 40:30–32) or eating the sacrificial food (Lev 22:4–7). It was later scribal rulings that attempted to extend this rule to the eating of ordinary food, and to people other than priests. The Pharisees were saying that Jesus shouldn't allow his disciples more laxity than they permitted their followers.

Now Jesus challenges the scribes indirectly, look at verses 3-6: “Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honour your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to ‘honour his father’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.” (Matthew 15:3-6 NIV)

Jesus doesn't deal directly with the Pharisees complaint about hand-washing. In fact he doesn't mention that issue until the last verse of our reading and even then not to the Pharisees, but separately to his disciples. Instead Jesus takes the phrase “tradition of the elders” that the Pharisees used in verse 2 and uses it against them, attacking the whole system of religious authority that lay behind it. Sometimes this passage is read as an attack against traditions generally by Jesus. But, Jesus wasn't really against tradition as such. What he was against were traditions which undermine the authority of God's word in our lives and so mislead us.

The Pharisees wrongly claimed that their traditions were derived from Jewish Law contained in the scripture and so had equal authority with that Law. Jesus is firmly rejecting that position. He is saying that the Pharisees traditions are in conflict with scripture and making it clear that ultimate authority must lie with scripture because scripture is God's word. Jesus makes this especially clear in verses 4 and 5 where he contrasts what “God said” with what you, the Pharisees say.

Both of the laws about parents that Jesus quotes are from chapter 20 of the book of Exodus and so were for the Jewish people a direct command from God. But Jesus is saying that the Pharisees are undermining these commands with their traditions. The practice that Jesus is referring to was called 'Qorban' a way of devoting property or money to 'God' – in practice giving them to the Temple treasury. This practice was later put into in the section of the Jewish traditions or Mishnah called the *Nedarim* and the *Nedarim* makes it clear that under the Qorban rules you could dedicate property to God without giving up the use of it. So Jesus was aware that grown up children with property were using and abusing this system to deprive their parents of assistance whilst having the ability to keep the money or property for themselves. There the Pharisees were saying 'we know a way you can avoid having to take care of your parents when they get old. Dedicate your money to God! Then when your parents need money from you, you can say "I'm sorry, I devoted it all to the Lord – I can't give you any." But, if you ever need money for yourself, no problem, you can have as much as you need. If modern bankers invented that as a financial device or scam, they might have called it an obligation sheltered reversible annuity, but in human terms it would never have worked because it breaks the law. The Pharisees made it work by overriding God's law with their traditions.

The example of the Qorban regulations illustrated a more general failure in the scribal approach to law-keeping, which Jesus now goes on to denounce with a telling quotation from Isaiah – see verses 7 to 9:

"You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'"" (Matthew 15:7-9 NIV)

The Pharisees weren't deliberately trying to deceive people, but they had got their priorities totally wrong. They have put the cart before the horse, and so have missed God's way. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees you're hypocrites because you throw a fit when my disciples don't follow one of your inconsequential little rules you made up, but you're telling people it's all right to break one of God's

rules laid down in his word. So the worship these people can offer is superficial and meaningless because it's based on human invention and doesn't come from God. The contrast between "lips" and "heart" prepares us for Jesus's emphasis in the coming verses on the importance of the internal rather than the external.

Jesus now turns from addressing the Pharisees directly to address the crowd who have apparently been onlookers and extends his attack to the whole OT system of ritual purity, look at verses 10 and 11:

"Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean', but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean'.""

(Matthew 15: 10-11 NIV)

Although Peter calls this a "parable" in verse 15, it's actually quite a clear statement. Jesus is moving towards the final phases of his ministry and he's no longer pulling his punches. Not all uncleanness in the OT came through food, of course; one could also be made unclean by disease (especially skin disease), by one's own bodily secretions or by touching something or someone unclean. But, external defilement through food was part of general external defilement and it is this principle which Jesus is setting aside here. He is saying that being made unclean is not external and ritual, but internal and moral, as vv. 17-19, which we'll look at in a minute, will explain further. The statement is simple and clear; yet its practical implications for those brought up on the OT and its teachings of ritual purity are far-reaching and indeed mind blowing. Later on they were bound to lead to controversy and division in a church which derived its heritage from Judaism.

Jesus now apparently withdraws from the crowd to speak to the disciples privately, see verses 12-14:

"Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." (Matthew 15:12-14 NIV)

Jesus was never afraid to be righteously controversial and we must follow his example and teach and tell-forth God's word fearlessly. He is also saying that the Pharisees are false teachers and should not be followed, because they will only lead their followers into serious error, indeed to destruction. They're spiritually blind and therefore unable to lead anyone along God's path.

Jesus then expands on the meaning of his earlier words for the benefit of the disciples, look at verses 17 to 20:

"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean'. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean'."

(Matthew 15:17-20 NIV)

Jesus is making the point that physical food just goes through the body and doesn't fundamentally affect our nature or heart. He says that true purity is located in our hearts and minds, not our stomachs. It's not a matter of what we eat, but of who we are. Jesus is saying that the problem in eating food forbidden by Jewish Law lay not within the food but in disobedience to God's command. That principle can clearly be extended beyond food as such, to include any aspect of ritual purity, but Jesus's saying focuses specifically on food. The early church struggled with food and purity issues as it tried to understand how the people of God could extend outside the Jewish community with its restrictive rituals.

The moral nature of true "uncleanness" is now made plain. The "unclean" things which come from the heart are certainly *words* (as "out of the mouth" in v. 11 might suggest) but also more broadly matters of behavior. Four of the six items Jesus mentions are taken directly from the Ten Commandments and occur here in the traditional order: murder, adultery, theft and false testimony. The remaining two items (sexual offenses and slanders) are extensions of the immediately preceding sins (adultery and false testimony), thus warning us against hiding behind a too limited definition of sin. The

fact that all the items listed as coming from the heart are bad does not mean that human beings are capable only of evil. The context is a discussion of what produces “uncleanness,” and so inevitably only the bad are mentioned here. But, the human heart can also produce good.

Jesus’ pronouncement in v. 11 and its explanation in vv. 17–19 have moved the discussion of purity far beyond the specific issue of hand washing raised by the scribes and Pharisees at the beginning. Here Jesus, as he starts to move towards the end of his earthly ministry, is setting the scene for the replacement of the Old Covenant of OT with the New Covenant in his blood and the consequent cancellation of the purity laws of that old covenant – because they are no longer God’s commandments. This will, of course, set the scene for the extension of the ministry of the gospel to the gentiles in the early church.

So this morning we have seen firstly that we must bow to the ultimate authority of scripture as God’s word and not seek to elevate any man made rule above it. Secondly, we saw that the purity or cleanliness which is required of us is not an outward obedience but an inner moral purity which must show itself both in abstention from sin and obedience to God’s commandments. But, we’ll never get there by ourselves. What we need to do is to turn to Jesus in repentance and ask him to change us from within by the power of the Holy Spirit. To paraphrase Max Lucado, God loves us the way we are, but he loves us too much to let us stay that way, he wants us to be just like Jesus. It’s so easy to see what everyone else should be doing and totally fail to see the need for change in our own lives. Finally we see that there’s a big difference between ritual and righteousness, between religion and a relationship with Jesus. It’s not enough to know about Jesus or what he taught, we need to know him in spirit and in truth.

Let’s just close with a few words of prayer. Father we ask you to help us to respect your word, far above all man made rules or traditions and along with the psalmist we say “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me” we ask you to cleanse us in the power of your Holy Spirit so that there may be no unclean

thoughts or ways left within us and bring us into a real living relationship with Your Son. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.