

From the Heart

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on November 10, 2019.

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."

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 15:1-2, 10–20).

The culture police were spying on Jesus' disciples for violations of their code of conduct. What they witnessed was the egregious violation of eating with unwashed hands. Long before liquid soap and hand sanitizer, there was the purification practice of washing hands. A healthy practice that over time had become unwritten law, a man-made code of conduct elevated to a Scripture equivalent.

But the scribes and Pharisees did not stop with citing the violation; they needed a culprit, someone leading *their* sheep astray, whom they identified: Jesus of Nazareth. "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat," they asked. The accusatory question sounds silly to us, because...it is. After spying on Jesus and his disciples, that is the best you've got? Unwashed hands? It sounds so petty, and it is meant to. Jesus reveals their policing pettiness by pointing not to their code of conduct but to the Moral Law of God.

While the scribes and Pharisees had clean hands for eating, they had hearts for breaking the Fifth Commandment and encouraging others to follow. Jesus turns their petty accusation into a substantive judgment, saying, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:8-9). They had clean hands but blind eyes, clean hands but sick hearts.

Clean Hands

Washing your hands before eating is a good, healthy practice, but it is not a law of God. The scribes and Pharisees had elevated the trivial at the expense of the important, which revealed their true spiritual condition. Their indifference to God's Moral Law and their zeal for their code of conduct is telling: It's not about clean hands.

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In the late 1980's, the mullet-wearing, 19-year-old, tennis phenom, Andre Agassi, starred in a camera commercial for the new Canon Rebel. The recognizable star stepped out of a white Lamborghini, lowered his sunglasses, and said three words that would make him famous: "Image is everything." Perhaps the phrase captured the materialism of the age, but it also echoed an ancient lie. Don't worry about the substance of who you are; rather, focus on what the world sees, because image is everything. We hear an echo of this in the oft-quoted deduction of Marshall McLuhan that "The medium is the message." We are prone to pay more to the delivery of the message than the substance of it. We want to see clean hands before supper even if the meal is dog food.

While we can pick apart our culture for its shallowness and superficiality (and it is . . .), my greatest concern is within the Church. Can Jesus' judgment of the scribes and Pharisees be said of us? Do we honor God with our lips but not our hearts? Do we know the Christian lingo but not Christ? Do we sing hymns with hearts of hatred? Are we hearers of God's Word but not doers of it? Do we say we love Christ but hate one another? Do we have clean hands but inside are full of filth?

Is our worship motivated by a genuine love for God or a performance-driven fear of man? Have you become a defender of what *you* think the Bible means rather than a humble student of it? Do you *not* submit to God's authority because you aren't getting your way? Do you consider *your* opinions superior because you know better than the rest of us? Do you think washing your hands will cleanse what the Apostle James calls "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition"?

Like someone with an obsessive-compulsive disorder of handwashing, you can wash and scrub your hands until they bleed, but clean hands will not cleanse the heart. Image is *not* everything. There really is eternal, substantive truth. Cleanse your image as you may, "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." Why the mouth? Because, "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart...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."

What is the condition of your heart? Have you obsessed on cleaning up your image thinking it will cleanse your heart? Could your spiritual life be described as one never-ending to-do list? The Christian life never has been nor ever will be about what you can do for God, nor is it about your agenda, nor is it about your image. If you think that by somehow keeping your Christian image in front of the rest of us will make up for your wicked heart, you may have clean hands but blind eyes.

Blind Eyes

To focus on the external at the expense of the internal is not only myopic it is spiritually blinding. Blinded by sin, the spiritually blind see only a mirage of their making, sometimes leading to self-deception. Religious deeds mask evil thoughts. Counterfeit compliments mask hatred. Rigorous rules mask lust. Legalism masks licentiousness. Financial fixation masks theft. Spurious support masks false witness. Flattery masks slander. The blind fan fleshly embers to a

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flame of outward conformity to their code of conduct all the while wandering further from the One who gives sight to the blind.

Far worse are those who serve as “blind guides,” leading people astray from Christ and toward a pit of death and destruction. Blind guides, or false teachers, are a consistent problem within the Church. They were active in the Old Testament Church, and they are active in the New. Thankfully, they will not plague us forever, but will be “rooted up,” but they can lead the unconverted and even the undiscerning astray. Note in Matthew 15 how the scribes and Pharisees watch to criticize. Why? Because Jesus isn’t leading *their* way. If only, Jesus and his disciples would align with them, follow them, all the way to their pit.

How do we spot a blind guide? How do we keep from being deceived by those who want to lead us but do not have eyes to see? We may deduce from the Apostle Peter’s second epistle the following questions: First, is this guide led by Scripture or his own code of conduct? (2 Pet. 1:16; 2:3) Be on the lookout for contradictions to the Word of God. Second, is Christ central to this guide’s life and message, or superfluous? (2 Pet. 1:3, 2:1). Watch for a big ego. Third, does he lead you to moral purity or enslavement to your desires? (2 Pet. 1:4, 2:19). Watch for an intolerance for the righteous and a tolerance for the worldly. Fourth, is his life characterized by godliness or arrogance? Does he despise church authority and slander its leadership? (2 Pet. 1:5; 2:10; 2:14). Watch for overt but especially subtle undermining of authority. Fifth, does he take you to Scripture or appeal to your flesh to win you to his side? (2 Pet. 1:19; 2:18). Watch for strategic lobbying. Sixth, does his life bear fruit or is he like “a spring without water”? (2 Pet. 1:8, 2:17). Watch out for a knowledgeable hypocrite. And, seventh, does he lead into paths of righteousness or destruction (2 Pet. 1:11; 2:1,3). Watch out for criticisms and causes that lead to confusion rather than Christ.

If by God’s grace he has given you eyes to see, open your eyes! Don’t be naïve. The scribes and the Pharisees were blind guides in Jesus’ earthly ministry, and there are blind guides today. Listen to our Lord: “Let them alone.” Beware of their venom and let them slither on to their pit. For, “if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” Ultimately, however, spiritual blindness is a symptom of a heart condition, a terminal malady cured only by the gospel.

Sick Hearts

God’s Word through the Prophet Jeremiah tells us about the fallen human heart: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). Answer? No one but the Great Physician. But still, we are so preoccupied with the shell. Today, we spend far more time and money on exercise and diet while the condition of our heart is often overlooked. Our fuel may be clean and our vehicle sleek, but from the heart come “evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.” Image is everything apart from Christ.

If we do consider the heart, it is considered to be some kind of guiding light, generated within us, as if life and health springs from the sick and dying. And so, the world encourages you to “follow your heart” never telling you of its terminal condition. Apart from God’s grace, the heart is indeed desperately sick, which makes the New Covenant promise all the more beautiful. God said through the Prophet Ezekiel, “I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within

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them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezek. 11:19-20). The promise is not of a better heart but a new one, one with which we may love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind” (Matt. 22:37).

Jesus said, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart,” yet by God’s grace He gives us a new heart that we may profess faith in Christ and be saved for “with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Rom. 10:10). As Jesus’ disciples we too are freed from compliance to a man-made code of conduct to live in obedience to our Lord.

This of course does not mean that we always have pure hearts, but it does mean that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). It doesn’t mean that we obsess over the external, washing our hands as if image is everything. It does mean, as the Apostle of Hebrews wrote, “since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:19-24). By God’s grace through faith in Christ, we are cleansed to see Christ, to love and obey him, and to praise him from the heart.

So, let us pray with the psalmist from the heart:

*Gracious God, my heart renew,
Make my spirit right and true;
Cast me not away from thee,
Let thy Spirit dwell in me;
Thy salvation’s joy impart,
Steadfast make my willing heart.¹*

Amen.

¹ *God, be merciful to me*, from Psalm 51:1-15, *Trinity Hymnal* #415