

Sunday August 20th, 2023
13th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 15:10-20

“What Defiles Us”

When I was a kid, we all played spin the bottle. A girl would spin the bottle and if it pointed to you when it stopped, the girl could either kiss you or give you a penny. By the time I was 16 I owned my own house.

One characteristic of the world we live in is that it is a very image-conscious world. People everywhere spend considerable time and expense to create an impressive outward appearance as if that is all that matters in life. The truth is you can't change what you are from the outside. The real you within remains. You may have a wardrobe full of branded clothes and designer shoes to wear, but that will not change your character.

You may get your hair dyed or bonded, go for slimming treatment, get 'six-pack abs', attend grooming courses, change your mannerisms, and speak with a foreign accent, but doing all that cannot change your character. You may be able to deceive people into thinking that you have changed, but you can never deceive God. He knows that you are still the same as before. He sees beyond the superficial veneer of your outward looks.

And what is scary is that God also sees beyond all your outward acts of piety and your outward appearances of purity. He knows the truth about you. You may be attending church very faithfully, serving in some Christian ministry, singing in the choir, and going regularly on mission trips. Do you think that because of all these things you have good standing before God? Many would like to think so. But please think again – what does the Bible say about this? You may be shocked to learn what it says.

Let us turn our focus to our passage of Scripture in Matthew 15:10-20. This is part of a passage where we see Jesus being confronted by the Scribes and Pharisees. They were the religious leaders of Israel at that time. And they made sure that everyone knew how religious they were. They literally wore their religion – making extra-wide phylacteries for their foreheads, and putting extra-long fringes on their robes (Matthew 23:5).

They fasted openly and prayed long prayers in public (Matthew 6:16; 23:14). They also made a grand show whenever they gave alms to the poor (Matthew 6:2,5). In all this, the Scribes and Pharisees were quite like the image-conscious world of today – pursuing outward acts of devotion and appearances of piety intensely, as if that is all that matters.

According to verse 1, this group of scribes and Pharisees that came to Jesus, had come from Jerusalem. They were not the local religious leaders who were based in Galilee. These were the ones of Jerusalem – the headquarters of all Jewish religious affairs. Why had they taken the trouble to make a 110 km trip all the way north to Galilee? Had they come with a desire to learn from Jesus or to acknowledge Him as the Son of God? Not at all.

The events in Matthew's gospel, leading up to this chapter, indicate that they had come to find fault with Jesus and His disciples. They sought to convince people that this was a deviant sect. The local Pharisees in Galilee had already tried to do this several times (Matthew 9:11,34; 12:2,14) but none of them could resist the power and wisdom with which Jesus spoke. Hence, they sent for their superiors at HQ to send reinforcements.

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So, these high-powered scribes and Pharisees were dispatched from Jerusalem, ready to point out all the faults of Jesus and His disciples. What happened? It turned out that their own faults and sins were exposed for all to see. The awful truth about them was broadcast to the crowds! Jesus showed them to be lawbreakers, hypocrites, and sinners. The scribes and Pharisees were of course extremely offended by this, but they could not answer Him or refute a single thing He said about them. This is because the Lord Jesus spoke the truth about them with God's authority.

And then with that same authority, Jesus predicted the spiritual disaster they were heading for. Look at vv.12-14, "Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?' He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.'"

Let us understand that this prediction of spiritual disaster is true not only of the scribes and Pharisees. It is also true of all who make the same mistake they made pursuing outward acts of devotion and appearances of piety intensely. And perhaps we may have unwittingly made this mistake as well and are also heading for spiritual disaster. So, what do we need to know about our spirituality from this passage.

First, outward forms, are things that are not prescribed in the Bible but are useful to help us apply what is taught in it. For example, when we pray, we usually close our eyes and put our hands together, don't we? But this is not prescribed in the Bible. It is something we learn by following the example of other Christians. Here's another example: Many of us pray every night just before we go to bed. It's a good habit even though nothing like that is explicitly mentioned in the Bible.

When we come to church, we see more outward forms being used – the ringing of the church bell when the service begins, the use of hymnals or power point for singing, the wooden pews you are sitting on. Every year we have a Church anniversary service, Christmas Eve, and Easter services. All these are outward forms that do not originate from any part of Scripture, but from traditions that have been handed down to us. These traditions are useful if they are kept in their proper place in our life and not given undue prominence in the church.

In our passage the outward forms are mentioned in v.2 as the 'tradition of the elders'. These were a collection of teachings of Jewish rabbis based on their own interpretations and applications of God's Law. These traditions were passed down by word of mouth until about 200 A.D. when they were finally compiled and written in a volume called the Mishnah. It included prayers and blessings for use on different occasions and detailed rules of conduct and bodily purity.

One entire section of this tradition deals with the washing of hands. It specified the various blessings that must be recited during washing and how much water must be used for effective ceremonial purification. E.g., "If a man poured water over one hand with a single rinsing, his hand is clean; but if over both hands with a single rinsing they are unclean unless he pours over them a quart or more of water." The Jews were required by this tradition to wash their hands before eating and after eating, and between courses of food.

Each household had to store a lot of water for these and other washing rituals. And this explains why the house in Galilee where Jesus turned water into wine had six large stone water pots (about 100 litres each, John 2:6).

They were used for such rituals. Since there was no piped water supply in those days, people had to make several trips a day to the nearest well, or spring, to provide sufficient water for all these rituals. You can imagine how cumbersome it must have been to observe them at every meal. The ‘tradition of the elders’ championed by the scribes and Pharisees made life very difficult for God’s people. That is why Jesus said later that they “bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne and lay them on men's shoulders” (23:4).

And so, when we read in v.2 that the disciples of Jesus did not wash their hands when they ate bread, we should not imagine that they held their bread with grubby hands all caked with dirt and grime. They probably washed their hands clean before touching any food just like we do, for proper hygiene. What they did not do was the cumbersome hand-washing ritual required before each meal.

When the scribes and Pharisees saw this, they were quick to accuse Jesus of failing to train His disciples well. They said, “Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?” To these religious leaders, what the disciples had done was a very, very serious offence. According to Matthew Henry, one Jewish rabbi declared “that to eat with unwashed hands is as great a sin as adultery.” Another rabbi said that he would rather die than transgress the tradition of the elders!

Can you see what the Jews had done to the tradition of the elders? They had raised it up to the same level of authority as God’s Law. But how can man-made rules be placed on par with God’s commandments? Doing this is surely a greater sin because God has commanded us not to add to His commandments (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32).

Let us keep this in mind, whenever we use any outward form that is not prescribed in the Bible. No outward form has the authority of a commandment of God. Therefore, it is not a sin to pray with your eyes open, or to forget to say grace before you eat a snack. It is not a sin to sing hymns using lyrics projected on a screen rather than using a hymnal. To insist that we must always keep these outward forms without exception, would make us just like the Pharisees.

There is another problem with all this. The Pharisees used their man-made tradition to avoid obeying God’s commandment! The irony of it all, is these people claimed to honour their ancient elders who had made these traditions, but in doing so they dishonoured their own elders at home! And then they conveniently used these traditions of the elders to keep all their wealth to themselves. What does this show? Isn’t it obvious that the ones they really sought to honour are themselves?

All their outward acts of devotion to God were only a pretext for their own selfish desires. We see this in v.8 where Jesus described them accurately with Isaiah’s prophecy – “This people honours me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.” Jesus investigated the hearts of these scribes and Pharisees, and He saw no inward devotion in them. Their outward acts of worship were meaningless since they were not produced by inward devotion. (vv.7-11).

Inward devotion to God is the very heart and soul of true religion. Remove it, and all that is left is just an empty shell. In v.7 Jesus used one word to describe those who worship outwardly without inward devotion. What is it? “Hypocrites!” This word is derived from a Greek word which means ‘actor’ and it was commonly used for those who acted in ancient Greek dramas. These actors put on different masks to portray different characters.

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Religious hypocrites are different from them. Nobody can tell that they are acting. They don't wear masks like the Greek actors did, and they are not performing on stage or in front of a camera like modern actors do. Those who see them think that what they are on the inside must be the same as what they appear to be on the outside. But they are being deceived without knowing it. And the greatest deception comes from those who appear to be very godly but are ungodly within.

This is the thing that makes religious hypocrisy so dangerous. It easily deceives many people and makes them fall into error. The danger of religious hypocrisy is so great that our Lord Jesus always spoke against it with the strongest words. Here in our passage, we see Him calling the scribes and Pharisees 'hypocrites' in public.

He had to expose their religion as a false religion; a powerless religion of form without substance; a godless religion that upheld man-made traditions at the expense of God's commandments; a man-centred religion that aims to satisfy man's selfish desires. It is no different from all religions where people seek God on their own terms, and where they give lip service to God just to procure favours for themselves.

The message for us is we should come for worship not because it is your usual routine to be here in Sunday morning, but because you sincerely want to experience the presence of God and express your love to God and hear Him speak to you.

Verse 10,11 – "Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand; it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.'" Here we find the lesson that Jesus wanted the crowds to understand well and take home from this whole episode. At this point, the Lord addresses the very heart of the problem. He deals with the reason why these Pharisees lacked both inward devotion and inward obedience. The reason is that they had no inward change.

The Pharisees were trying to pursue outward reform through hand-washing rituals and all the other outward forms prescribed in the tradition of the elders. But this is impossible to attain because they were inwardly impure. What they should have pursued is inward change, not outward reform.

Jesus gave a full explanation of this statement in vv.17-20. From this explanation, we understand two things: Firstly, nothing that you eat can ever make you more pleasing to God or less pleasing to God (v.17). The only thing that food can do is to feed your stomach. And the only benefit of washing your hands before every meal is to prevent a stomach bug.

No amount of handwashing will affect your character. It cannot prevent your character from being defiled, and neither can it remove any defilement from it. And this is the kind of defilement you should be most concerned about because God looks at your character, i.e., your attitudes, thoughts, words, and actions (v.19). He wants you to be clean inwardly.

Thus, King David prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10) This brings us to the second thing that we need to understand. Jesus explained in v.18 that the human heart is the ultimate source of defilement. It is naturally sinful. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

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And because the human heart is sinful, it will keep on producing sinful character, including the evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies which are listed in v.19 of our text.

This is the take home lesson that Jesus gave to the crowds in Matthew 15. He wanted them to be most concerned about inward defilement rather than outward defilement. What you get from eating with unclean hands is nothing compared to what you get from having an unclean heart. And this problem is universal. Everyone is born with an unclean heart – the scribes and Pharisees were rebuked for it. The multitudes were told to hear and understand it.

The good news is that Jesus Christ can change your heart. God's Word says in 2 Corinthians 5:17 – "...if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

And after Jesus changes your heart, your character will gradually be changed from inside out. This change does not come automatically. We must keep walking daily in the Spirit and not in the flesh. But we have His wonderful assurance that He will accomplish His work of changing us from within. Ephesians 2:10 says that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

Today we have seen that cleansing your hands can never make your heart clean. But when Christ cleanses your heart, your hands will become clean. May the Lord give all of us the clean hearts we need and through that, clean hands as well.