

Out of a Whole and Healthy Heart

Thomas Robinson, *Deeper with Jesus*, 7, March 16, 2014

Matthew 15:1-20 [Cf. Mk 7:1-23]

¹ Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² “Why do your disciples **break the tradition of the elders**? For they do not **wash their hands** when they eat.”

³ He answered them, “And why do you **break the commandment of God** for the sake of **your tradition**? ⁴ For God commanded,

‘Honor your father and your mother,’ [Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16]

and, *‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’* [Exod 21:17]

⁵ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “**What you would have gained from me is an offering to God,**” ⁶ he need (must) not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

⁸ *‘This people **honors me with their lips,**
but **their heart is far from me;***

⁹ *in vain do **they worship me,**
teaching as instructions the **commandments of men.**”* [Isa 29:13]

¹⁰ And he called the people to him and said to them, “**Hear and understand:**

¹¹ it is not what goes **into the mouth** that defiles a person,
but what comes **out of the mouth**; this defiles a person.”

¹² Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that **the Pharisees were offended** (scandalized) when they heard this saying?”

¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are **blind guides**. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain **the parable** to us.”

¹⁶ And he said, “Are you also still without **understanding**? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? ¹⁸ But **what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart**, and this **defiles** a person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

²⁰ These are what defile a person. But to eat with **unwashed hands** does not defile anyone.”

Matthew 5:33-35, 37

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, ...

³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

Isaiah 1:16-17

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; | remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; | cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; | seek justice, correct oppression; | bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

Matthew 13:52

And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Back into the Fire of Controversy

Our journey with Matthew takes us through hills and valleys of Jesus' ministry to lead us to grasp what was at stake. What was so important? Why did people ultimately kill Jesus? Challenging teaching (5-7), demanding discipleship (8-10), counterintuitive & controversial—Sabbath (11-12). Parables of the kingdom in word and deed (13-14). All through we see Jesus' distinctive path.

This text is difficult because it takes us back into the world of disputes of 1st cent. Israel. Many different groups vying to define where the next stage of Israel's story goes. Pharisees, Zealots, Sadducees, Essenes, John the Bap., others. Jesus shares much with the Pharisees, but the differences were explosive. A group from Jerusalem challenges Jesus on a defining teaching.

“Washing hands” was not a matter of hygiene, it was a priestly ritual (Ex 30:18-21) before sacrifice. If your disciples did it, you said all Israel was a “priestly nation” (Ex 19:6) as the Pharisees did. Personal and national identity were defined by this purity ritual – a “tradition of the elders.” God wants his people defined in relation to others by purity rites, tithing, ‘clean’ food, Sabbath.

The Blessing and Temptation of Tradition

Jesus never rejects these practices, but intensely disagrees with the Pharisees' traditions that make them more specific than scripture and with the idea that they define God's people. It is a perennial problem. Healthy and useful tradition becomes law and doctrine that defines God.

Jesus knows what's at stake and poses a pointed example. Honor Father/Mother – care for them. But if you make a vow to God you must perform it. What if you vow the parent money to God? What does God want? Pay the vow or care for your parents? Pharisees: honor God, give to God. Jesus: God wants care for parents. ‘Hypocrite’: seem to honor God but against God's heart. Jesus says Isaiah's words fit: tradition gives seeming honor to God, but is far from God.

Jesus doesn't challenge the tradition for the sake of innovation, but for the sake seeing God's real purposes embodied in scripture. God has sought for the broken and sinners all along. Jesus welcomes tax-collectors, touches lepers, eats with sinners. The real purity that delights God.

An Exploding ‘Parable’

In this context of “washing hands” Jesus calls the crowd to hear a parable: what comes in and what goes out of the mouth. In – food, pure or impure. Out – what? Air, spit, sneeze, vomit?

The Pharisees see where he's going and are upset. Opposite from them. The disciples tell Jesus.

Jesus says, let them alone. Don't fight them. They're God's concern. Blind who think they sees.

The Pharisees saw that Jesus' parable did not ultimately just apply to washing hands. It undermined their whole conception of a definable people marked out by purity of practice. The sources of impurity were not outside threats to be avoided but inside the person, hard to mark with clear boundary lines. At this moment the parable struck the issue of washing, but if it stood, it changed the entire system of evaluating what was important in religion.

The Pollution and Purity that Matters

Peter asks to understand. He has been living it but has not seen the rationale. Jesus shows that he intends the parable to have a broad and comprehensive meaning. Clean and unclean foods have a symbolic meaning that's important, but they do not carry a defilement that really matters to God. Jesus is very matter of fact. You eat, you digest, you eliminate. That's food.

But they heart has always been God's main concern. There the deep pollution of life festers and comes out in word and action. A whole and healthy heart in you is what God truly seeks.