

“What Makes Us Dirty”

Matthew 15:1-20

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I want to introduce two young men who I think illustrate the difference faith in Jesus Christ can make in someone's life. First, we have Joe, a young man who grew up in a good home but wasted every opportunity he had. Though quite intelligent, he flunked out of high school. Because he was so disrespectful and even violent at home his parents kicked him out when he was 16. He makes a living selling illegal drugs and is a frequent drug user himself.

Jim, on the other hand, is a really wonderful young man. He graduated from high school last year at the top of his class and is now getting straight A's in college. He works a part-time job but spends quite a few hours each week volunteering at the Salvation Army, teaching Sunday School at his church, and tutoring kids who are struggling with homework. In fact, Jim, why don't you come here and tell the folks about a mission's project you are planning for the summer...

Foiled you! My guess is that everyone in this room assumed that clean cut... dressed in a suit, was Jim, the model Christian young man. And that you assumed... Dressed like a bum, was Joe, the drug dealer. Why? Because of external appearance. What they each look like.

Now to be honest, I think many drug dealers probably look more like..., than..., but that is not always they case. And there is nothing that requires that it be that way. Being a Christian, a follower of Jesus, living in a way that honors the Lord and help other people, is not really about what someone looks like on the outside. Rather it is about what he/she is like on the inside.

I suspect most of you know that, but I also think we have a tendency to forget this sometimes, especially when we run into someone like Jim who doesn't fit our expectation of what a Christian should look like.

Folks, today as we continue our journey through the gospel of Matthew, we come to chapter 15:1-20. Here we find Jesus teaching some people, including us, that what really makes someone dirty, what really displeases God, is not what's on

the outside, but what's on the inside. Let's pause and pray the Lord would help each of us learn that important lesson today.

Matthew 15. This is another encounter between Jesus and those people known as the Pharisees. The Pharisees were some of the Jewish religious leaders at the time Jesus was on earth. For various reasons they felt threatened by Jesus and thus were very antagonistic to Him and His ministry.

This particular group had traveled all the way from Jerusalem, the Jewish capital, to Galilee, the northern province of Israel. Whether they had come specifically to confront Jesus, who they had likely heard much about from their colleagues in that region, or if they were there for some other reason, we don't know. But they have a question for Jesus.

Matthew 15:2 “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” Now, some of you kids are thinking, “They sound just like my mother.” But, in the first century folks did not know about germs, so that is not why they washed their hands before a meal. Though, it is a good idea to do that.

The Pharisees washed as part of a religious ritual, to indicate how pure and clean they thought they were. In the Old Testament there were ritual washings connected with some occasions, but there was nothing that required people to wash before meals. This practice came from the oral tradition the priests had developed over the years which consisted of hundreds of specific details on how things were supposed to be done. The bottom line is, God, through the Bible, had never commanded people to wash before meals. This was the rule the religious leaders had come up with on their own.

So, as Jesus replies He doesn't directly answer their question, but uses it as an opportunity to show the shallowness of the Pharisees' religion. **Matthew 15:3-6 He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded,**

'Honor your father and m your mother,' and 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.

Though no verse in the Bible says, "Wash before you eat," God had very clearly said, "Honor your father and mother." This is one of the Ten Commandments, number 5, recorded in Exodus 20. Jesus said the Pharisees were violating that commandment through another of the traditions they had developed. Part of honoring parents includes helping care for them when they get older and are not able to do so themselves. That is still true today. But the Pharisees had decided the money that was set aside and devoted to God should not be used to help parents. After all, God is more important than mom or dad. However, and this was key, the individual can still use that "dedicated money" in a way he decided is honoring to the Lord.

It might work this way: Let's say you have \$2000 in the bank. You declare it is all devoted to the Lord. "Korban" is the word the Jews used. Then your mom calls and asks to borrow some money so she can fix her car. You say, "Sorry mom, I don't have any money I can give you. All I have is in the bank and that money is dedicated to the Lord."

However, a couple days later you see an 85" TV on sale for only \$700. You think, "Wow, this would be so cool. I could have friends over and we could watch baseball games this summer. It would be a good way to build relationships, and I will have more opportunities to tell them about Jesus. It would be honoring to the Lord to spend \$700 on this TV."

Now the Pharisees were not buying giant screen TVs, but "korban" for them had become an excuse to be selfish and not help one's parents. So, Jesus says, **Matthew 15:7-9 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "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."**

Ouch! That is strong condemnation. Jesus is saying "You Pharisees claim you love God and want to honor Him, but those are just words. On the inside you don't care about God at all. You are not really interested in following the Lord's commandments. You just make up rules as you go along. You are nothing but hypocrites. You claim to be wonderful, Godly people, but you are lying because your actions and your thoughts don't match that at all."

Jesus then gives an indirect answer to explain why His disciple don't wash before every meal. **Matthew 15:10-11 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."** Again, Jesus is not talking about hygiene. It is spiritual cleanliness, not physical, that He is concerned about here. Now, I can make a theological argument that it is good to wash your hands and take a shower or bath regularly. Good hygiene helps us better care for our bodies which are temples of the Holy Spirit. Failing to bathe can even make life unpleasant for the people around us, which is hardly loving your neighbor as yourself.

Yet, nowhere in the Bible does it say, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." That is an American tradition. It is an okay thing to believe, until it starts making us think dirt on the outside is more of a problem than the dirt on the inside. Many folks who use that saying are far more concerned about cleanliness than they are about Godliness. Jesus would say, that is foolish. If you think it is more important to make sure you take a shower in the morning than read your Bible, you are confused. Being clean on the inside is more important than being clean on the outside.

Matthew 15:12 Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" Jesus maybe thought: Really? Where have you guys been? But **Matthew 15:13 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."** Jesus' point is that the Pharisees, despite their wonderful reputations as men of God, have no spiritual

wisdom, no spiritual life. He doesn't want His friends to even pay attention to what they say.

However, Peter and probably some of the rest of the disciples are not sure what Jesus' point actually is, so, **Matthew 15:15 Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us."** Jesus probably thinks, really? **Matthew 15:16 And he said, "Are you also still without understanding"** One version says, "Are you being willfully stupid?" Rather than explain the parable, however, Jesus goes back to His main point to make sure the 12 disciples and the rest of us get it. **Matthew 15:17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled?**

That is second grade health class. **Matthew 15:18a But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart...** By heart Jesus doesn't mean the organ that pumps blood, nor even the source of our emotions. He uses "heart" to refer to our will. Our true desires, who we really are on the inside. **Matthew 15:18b, 19 And that defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.**

These are, of course, more than just words that come from our mouth. These are actions and attitudes that reveal what we are really like on the inside. And these sins are what make someone dirty and filthy. **Matthew 15:20 These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."**

The point, again, is godliness, holiness, being a person who honors the Lord, is not about external things, not about going through rituals or looking a certain way. It is about the attitudes of our heart and those attitudes being expressed in our words and actions.

Okay, this conversation between the Pharisees, Jesus and His disciples happened a long time ago, but there are important lessons here for us.

#1 What we eat doesn't hurt our soul. That is highlighted in the gospel of Mark. In chapter 7, after Jesus says nothing that comes into a person from the outside can defile him, Mark adds, **Mark 7:19b thus he declared all foods clean.** Since Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience, he

does not highlight that implication. The Jewish dietary laws have always been an important part of Judaism. Moses received guidelines on kosher eating from the Lord and wrote them in the Old Testament law. That is why, even today, an Orthodox Jew will not eat a ham sandwich, because pork, pig meat, is one of the foods forbidden by the Mosaic law.

In the New Testament we learn that these dietary laws have now served their purpose and are no longer in force. In Acts 10 the Lord shows Peter, through a vision, that *all food* is now considered clean and kosher. In Colossians 2:16, Paul says that no one should condemn someone because he/she eats a certain type of food. Mark, as he writes his gospel probably about 15 years after Jesus had been on earth, notes the Lord Himself really was canceling any dietary regulations by insisting nothing you put in your mouth can make you unclean.

Now that doesn't mean all foods are good for our physical health. No food will harm your soul, but it can hurt your body. Some folks claim Christian should follow the dietary restrictions of the Old Testament because it is a healthy diet. That is fine, as long as they keep in mind there is no spiritual risk in eating slabs of bacon, only a physical risk. And some folks insist bacon is very good for us.

Now, I don't want to confuse you, gluttony is indeed a sin. Addiction to, or abuse of food, alcohol, or any substance is a sin and can lead to other sins. But the root problem is a lack of self-control, not the chemical properties of what we put in our body. Jesus is clear, what we eat doesn't hurt our soul.

#2 We should not judge others by external appearance. God gives us an important reminder in **1 Samuel 16:7 The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.** The Pharisees were all about outward appearance. They assumed that because the disciples did not wash their hands before a meal, they were really not godly men.

Most of you did that at the beginning of the sermon when you assumed that character was a good Christian because he was nicely dressed. There are a lot of different ways to fall into this

trap. Because of how people dress or how they look we draw all sorts of conclusions about their character and ability. Yes, sometimes we are right, but sometimes we are wrong.

For example, during Boer war in South Africa, early 1900's, a young English soldier escaped from his Dutch captors. A handbill was posted which read, "Wanted: Englishman, 25 years old, 5' 8" tall, walks with a forward stoop, has pale complexion, talks through nose, cannot pronounce the letter "s" properly.

The unimpressive soldier they were looking for was Winston Churchill. Thirty years later, Churchill was still not much to look at, but he was perhaps the greatest leader of the 20th century. On the other hand, we tend to be impressed by people who project a certain image, even if it's only a façade. We need to be careful not to judge others based on appearance.

That is true when it comes to faith and godliness as well. The Pharisees could look very religious, but in their hearts, in reality, they were far from God. Over the years, there have been many hypocrites in the church. Jesse James, the 19th century outlaw, was one of them. He killed a man in a bank robbery and the next Sunday he was baptized at a Baptist church in Missouri. Then he killed another man and the next Sunday joined the choir and led the singing in the congregation. One writer said, "He liked his Sundays, Jesse did. But occasionally he did not show up for church because he had to work. Sometimes that was the best day to rob a train."

Of course, most hypocrites are not as obvious as Jesse James. They tend to be much more subtle in their sin and often lay on the religion even thicker than Jesse. But their hypocrisy is just as great. In recent years the hypocrisy of numerous American pastors and church leaders has been exposed. While claiming to be servants of Jesus, these folks were involved in the sexual immorality, theft and deception, just like Jesus mentioned in verse 19.

Last month a worship pastor in Ohio murdered his wife and then tried to make it look like an intruder had shot her. Yes, I think some of these folks are sincere Christians who happened to fall into sin. Some of them seem very genuine in their repentance. Yet, I'm afraid others simply have

hearts dominated by lust, greed and selfishness, rather than a love for God and other people.

I do think part of the problem is often that non-discerning congregations are impressed with a leader that has a charismatic personality and is an eloquent speaker or a gifted musician. Thus, they don't take time to really consider the character of the person they choose as their leader.

As Chisholm Baptist church is looking at Matt Hagsten and Bryan Fagerstrom as new leaders of our congregation, the most important concern is whether these men are godly individuals who meet the qualifications the Bible spells out for elders and pastors (1 Timothy 3). It is the heart, not the externals that matter the most. And I am so grateful these two men, truly seem to have hearts full of love for the Lord.

#3 We need to do this in our own lives. We need to focus on pleasing God from our heart. Friends, I hope you realize that it is possible to come to church every Sunday and still not truly love God. I hope you realize it is possible to know all about the Bible, sing in the choir, and serve on a church committee, and not really love God.

I am afraid there are people like that in churches all around the globe and my fear is there may be someone who fits that description listening today. Friends, don't kid yourself. It is possible to be caught up in doing good church things to impress other people or because it makes you feel fulfilled or because you want to serve those in need but have no love for God and not desire to honor Him.

Years ago, Ken Medima sang a song called "Mister Simon." The words are: "Every Sunday morning when the bells begin to ring, Mr. Simon is at the church, that is where he does his thing. Oh, he loves to see the people who have come to praise the Lord, and he loves to join them singing all in one accord." But as the song goes on to tell, that is all there was to Mr. Simon's Christianity. It was an external religion, not a faith of the heart. And though that religion impressed other people, it *did not impress God*. Faith like that is only an empty shell. Oh, sometimes it is a very ornately decorated shell, *but it is still empty*.

Now, often people don't have completely pure motives when they are serving in the church or

trying to help others. So yes, sometimes part of the reason we do something is because it pleases other people or makes us feel good. But we need to make sure that at least a good portion of what motivates us to be involved in Christian service, is our love for the Lord Jesus and a desire to honor Him.

If that is missing, if you are doing the church thing without really thinking about the Lord at all, you should probably take a break until your motives change. Oh, keep coming to church, keep reading the Bible, keep praying, you need to do those things. But don't be content trying to live a Christian life focused only on doing the right things. Our motives for following Jesus should flow from a heart full of love and joy.

What do we do if there doesn't seem to be any love and joy there? No, we cannot create attitude on our own. Praying, asking the Lord to fill us with His love and joy is a good place to start. Then I suggest you stay focused on the gospel. Remind yourself of who Jesus is, and what He has done for you. Keep reflecting on His goodness, His love, His grace, so evident in His death and resurrection. Let that truth, that beauty fill your mind and heart, your inside, with love and joy.