

Matthew 15:10-20

Introduction

Last week, we saw the Pharisees and Scribes come to Jesus and ask Him this question: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” And here was Jesus’ answer:

“And why do you break the *commandment of God* for the sake of *your tradition*? For *God commanded*, ‘Honor your father and 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*. 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*.’”

So Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees’ question about hand washing is basically this: “*Your traditions* are not the *same thing* as *God’s commandments*. In fact, your “pious” and “spiritual” traditions have become nothing more than a *substitute* for *true spirituality*.” But with this answer, Jesus is not yet finished. So far He has focused on the traditions of men, and how these traditions are not the same thing as God’s Word. But what about *God’s Word*? What about the *Scriptures* that the Pharisees had used to explain their tradition of hand washing before meals? What about the Old Testament *laws of ritual* purity – of ceremonial cleanness and uncleanness? As we saw last week, the tradition of hand washing didn’t just come out of nowhere. And so we read in verses 10-11:

VI. 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.”

When Jesus says “hear and understand”, He wants to make sure that we are paying close and careful attention. This will be **very, very, VERY** important. So let us heed His words! Let us be careful this morning to *hear* and to *understand* that “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.”

Now when Jesus says this, is He saying something *new*? Is He saying something that wasn’t true in the Old Testament, but *is* true *now*? In other words, is this actually an announcement that the food laws of the Old Testament are now done away with? (Now that would be something “new”!) And *most* commentators and translations (cf. Mark 7:19) say “yes” – this *is* something new. So I need to admit to you first of all that I will be going against the flow here. But for right now I feel strongly enough about this that I just can’t preach it any other way. However, I’m also happy to say that the main point of this passage will not be affected by this interpretation.

“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.” I believe Jesus is saying something here that has been

equally true at every stage of history ever since the fall of man. So then what about those Old Testament food laws?

- ✓ Leviticus 11:10-12 – Anything in the seas or the rivers that has not fins and scales... is *detestable to you*. You shall *regard them as detestable*; you shall not eat any of their flesh, and *you shall detest their carcasses*.
- ✓ Leviticus 11:13 – And *these you shall detest* among the birds; they shall not be eaten; *they are detestable*: the eagle, the bearded vulture, the black vulture...
- ✓ Leviticus 11:20 – *All winged insects that go on all fours are detestable to you*.
- ✓ Leviticus 11:26 – *Every animal that parts the hoof but is not cloven-footed or does not chew the cud is unclean to you*.
- ✓ Leviticus 11:29 – And *these are unclean to you among the swarming things* that swarm on the ground: the mole rat, the mouse, the great lizard of any kind...
- ✓ Leviticus 11:8, 24 – You shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall not touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you... and *by these you shall become unclean*.

Aren't these passages pretty clear about the fact that it *is* what goes into the mouth that defiles a person? Well, first of all we need to remember that the food laws were a symbolic reminder to the Israelites that they had been chosen out of all the nations of the earth to be holy and set apart unto God. Leviticus itself makes this very clear:

- ✓ Leviticus 11:44-45 – Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

Now the holiness of God does not consist in His abstaining from certain foods! The holiness of God is not an *outward* or *external* kind of thing. The holiness of God is *who* God is! So when the people of Israel abstained from “unclean” foods, it was a constant reminder of their calling to be *separate* from the wickedness and idolatry of the Gentile nations and to be conformed to the *moral* purity and holiness of God. So in the New Testament, When the distinction between (“clean”) Jews and (“unclean”) Gentiles was abolished, so also was the distinction between clean unclean foods (Acts 10). When God’s law was written *on our hearts* through the Holy Spirit who indwells us, there was no longer any need for these *outward* reminders. When Jesus brought us the *true* “cleanness” to which the distinction between clean and unclean foods had always pointed, then there was no longer any need for the old pointers, and so they passed away (Col. 2:16-17). The food laws of the Old Testament were an external and outward *sign* that God had chosen Israel to be holy from the *inside* out – set apart *from* the “unclean” Gentiles, and set apart *unto* God.

Now God knew that an Israelite might sometimes accidentally touch the carcass of an unclean animal or even have to pick up and carry a carcass on purpose:

- ✓ Leviticus 11:24-25 (cf. 27-28, 39-40) – Whoever touches their carcass *shall be unclean* until the evening, and whoever carries any part of their carcass shall wash his clothes *and be unclean* until the evening.

So sometimes an Israelite will *have* to become unclean! But then notice what God says at the end of the chapter:

- ✓ Leviticus 11:43 – You **shall not** make yourselves detestable with any swarming thing that swarms, and you **shall not** defile yourselves with them, and become unclean through them.

So... an Israelite becomes ritually unclean because he has to pick up an animal carcass and carry it out of the camp. No big deal! He is *not yet* truly defiled in God's sight. He has *not yet* failed to be holy *as God is holy*. But if he *refuses* to live the rest of the day as one who is *ritually* unclean, and if he *refuses* to wash his clothes, *now* his uncleanness becomes far more serious. Now his uncleanness has become a true defilement of the *heart* because he has mocked the very *heart* of the food laws. He is rejecting not just the food laws themselves, but *also* his calling to be holy from the *inside* out, *even as God is holy*. So when Jesus says, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person", He is not denying that certain foods could make you *ritually* unclean. Instead, He is simply pointing out what has always been the case. He is interpreting the true *heart* of the law. It was *never* the foods *themselves* that truly defiled a person in *God's* sight, but rather it was always the *heart* that brought about true defilement.* Now do you think that *we* would not have needed this instruction? Jesus says to *us*: *Hear and understand*.

VII. Matthew 15:12 – Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?"

The disciples are truly concerned. All their lives they have respected and admired the Pharisees. The Pharisees are the teachers, and the guardians, and the practitioners of the law. If anyone is righteous, the Pharisees are righteous. And so it bothers the disciples to see the Pharisees offended by what Jesus has said. And if this bothered the disciples, then you can imagine why the Pharisees would have been so offended! The Pharisees are offended because their reputation for righteousness *depends* mainly on the fact that they are so very careful to avoid touching or eating unclean foods. So when Jesus says that "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person", He is stripping them of their supposed righteousness. He is robbing the Pharisees of their most important claim to fame. Is it possible that the Pharisees could live in absolute perfect obedience to the food laws of the Old Testament, avoiding anything and everything that is unclean, and yet they themselves could still be *unclean* in God's sight? The disciples are confused. Certainly, this could not have been what Jesus *intended*! "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?"

VIII. Matthew 15:13 – He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up."

Now in the Old Testament, those who were truly *righteous* were those who had been *planted* by God.

* When Jesus says these things, He *is* laying the *foundation* for the day when these food laws are fulfilled, but He is not yet setting them aside. On Mark 7:19 see Lenski and Ridderbos; cf. KJV & NKJV.

- ✓ Isaiah 60:21 (cf. 61:3; 5:1-7) – *Your people shall all be righteous*; they shall possess the land forever, *the branch of my planting*, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified.
- ✓ Isaiah 61:1, 3 (NASB) – The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners... So *they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD*.

But now Jesus says that the Pharisees are a plant that the Father has not planted – therefore, their “righteousness” is no righteousness at all! Therefore, they can avoid unclean foods all they want, and yet they *themselves* are still unclean! And since the Pharisees are unclean, then they are destined to be rooted up and destroyed in the coming judgment. But Jesus is not finished...

IX. Matthew 15:14 – “Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

Jesus knows how *easy* it is to be impressed with the righteousness of the Pharisees. Jesus knows how easy it is for *us* to be impressed with the righteousness of the Pharisees. And so He comes right out and tells His disciples to “let them alone”. In other words, don’t concern yourself with what offends the Pharisees. Don’t be impressed with their righteousness. They may think of themselves as guides to the blind and lights to those who are in darkness (cf. Rom. 2:19), but they are actually just as blind as the people who follow them. I know this runs counter to what you have always thought of the Pharisees, but the Pharisees are not to be trusted. *Their version of righteousness is counterfeit, and it leads only to destruction*. This should be a warning to us! But the disciples still don’t understand. (For that matter, do *we* really understand?) How can the Pharisees be so unclean, when they have paid such careful attention to God’s law? And so we read in verses 15-20:

X. Matthew 15:15-20 – 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.”

Jesus’ point here is very simple – and yet we’re *constantly* missing it! What goes into the mouth never ends up in the *heart* because after it passes through the stomach, it is simply expelled into the toilet (literally, the “latrine”). In and of itself, food cannot truly defile a person because it never touches the *heart*. That’s *always* been true! But what comes *out of the mouth* proceeds **FROM** the *heart*, and *this* defiles a person. Now if we’re not careful, we’ll still miss the true significance of what Jesus is saying. Even here, the point is not our words, but our *heart*! The point here is not that our *words* defile us. The point is that the words came from our heart, and so the *source* and *fountain* of all our defilement is our *own* hearts. The real sewage is not in the toilet, but rather right “here” *in our own hearts*. The real *source* of our defilement and uncleanness is *never without*, but *always within* – it is *not outside* of us, but *inside* of us! But we

forget this, and so we focus on the things that are outside of us, as though *they* were the cause and the source of our defilement.

“OUT OF the heart COME evil thoughts, murder [the 6th commandment], adultery, sexual immorality [the 7th commandment], theft [the 8th commandment], false witness [the 9th commandment], slander.” *These* are what defile a person. But once again, Jesus’ point is not simply that a person is defiled only when these things show up in his life. Jesus’ point is that before these things ever became *visible* in a person’s life, they were already *there* in his heart. The real *source* of our defilement and uncleanness is *never* without, but always within – it is *not* outside of us, but *inside* of us! What is the *cause* and the *source* of all our defilement? It is our own heart. Calvin writes: “It is therefore a general statement, that pollution does not come from without into a man, but that the fountain is concealed within him.”

The Pharisees were far too optimistic about themselves (cf. Bruner, Hagner, Morris). They assumed that their own hearts were basically clean, and so they only needed to keep themselves from outside “impurities”. But they were wrong! They could keep themselves from outside “impurities” all they wanted, but the true evil was all the time *present within them!*

Conclusion

“What an awful picture we have here of human nature, and drawn too by one who knew what was in a man. What a fearful catalogue is this of the contents of our own bosoms! What a melancholy list of seeds of evil our Lord has exposed, lying deep down within every one of us, and ready at any time to start into active life! What can the proud and self-righteous say, when they read such a passage as this? This is no sketch of the heart of a robber, or murderer. It is the true and faithful account of the hearts of all mankind. May God grant that we may ponder it well and learn wisdom!” (Ryle)

We think that the problem is the billboard or the “Christian” romance novel. We must guard against impurity from without. But the problem is not the billboard or the book. The billboard and the book are not unclean in themselves. It is not what goes through our eye gate that defiles us, but rather that which was *already in our hearts*. If I could paraphrase Calvin: “An unholy heart pollutes the billboard and the book by making them the *ministers*, or *tools*, of sinful desires.”

We think that the problem is the internet. We must guard against impurity from without. But the problem is not the internet. The internet is not unclean. The social networking site is not unclean. The website does not pollute our heart; rather our heart pollutes the website whenever it makes that website the minister, or the tool, of the *flesh* (addiction/idolatry; slothfulness; unwholesome dialogue; unwholesome “friends”; etc.).

We think that the problem is the alcohol. We must guard against impurity from without. But the problem is not the alcohol. The alcohol is not unclean. The alcohol does not pollute our heart; rather we can say that our heart pollutes the alcohol whenever it makes alcohol the minister or tool of the *flesh* (drunkenness and debauchery; desiring to fit in with an unwholesome crowd; desiring to flaunt our “freedom” in Christ).

We could go on and on, but let's just listen now to the Apostle Paul:

- ✓ Titus 1:15 – **To the pure**, all things are pure, but **to the defiled** and unbelieving, *nothing* is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.

To the pure, all things are pure! And of course, the pure are those who do not use things as the ministers and tools of the flesh! The real source of our defilement and uncleanness is never without, but always within – it is *not outside* of us, but *inside* of us! What is the *cause* and the *source* of all our defilement? It is our *own heart*. Therefore...

Let us be sober and wise in the use of our “freedoms”. There are many Christians who should cancel their Facebook accounts – not because Facebook is “unclean”, but because they know how prone **their own hearts** are to make Facebook a tool of the flesh. There are many Christians who should abstain from alcohol – not because alcohol is unclean, but because they know how prone **their own hearts** are to use alcohol as the tool of sinful desires. I think it is safe to say that all men should always avoid looking at the billboard because they know how prone **their own hearts** are to make that billboard a tool of the flesh. I think it is safe to say that all women should always avoid reading the “Christian” romance novel because they know how prone **their own hearts** are to make that novel a tool of the flesh. Our hearts can use many different things as *tools* and *expressions* of our sinful nature (T.V., music, internet, alcohol, clothes, food, etc.). So let us remember these two exhortations of the Apostle Paul:

- ✓ Romans 13:14 – But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 10:12 – Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

The second lesson here is that we must **remember** that our true **battle** is not against what is outside, but what is inside. Obviously, the key to being sober and wise in the use of our freedoms is to remember that the true source of all our defilement is *not* outside of us, but inside us – it is our own heart. There is a sense in which I know I need to qualify the next statement, but I'm not going to because I just want it to be as simple and straightforward as possible. We must stop waging war against the bad things “out there”, and start waging war against the bad things “in here” (the thoughts and desires in our hearts). We must not think that we are righteous because we have avoided the impurities “out there”. Jesus would strip us of any such “righteousness” by revealing the impurities in our own *hearts*.

J.C. Ryle give us two very important exhortations. He says first of all:

“The right heart is a heart sprinkled with the blood of Christ, and renewed by the Holy Ghost, and purified by faith. Never let us rest till we find within the witness of the Spirit, that God has created in us a clean heart, and made all things new (Psalm 51:10; 2 Cor. 5:17).”

Has your heart been sprinkled with the blood of Christ, and renewed by the Holy Ghost, and purified by faith? Do you have the witness of the Holy Spirit that God has created in you a clean

heart, and made all things new? If we will truly see our desperate need for this, then we can *have* it! – Through faith (trust) in Jesus Christ! But then Ryle says this:

“Let it be a settled resolution with us to ‘keep our hearts with all diligence,’ all the days of our lives (Prov. 4:23). Even after renewal they are weak. Even after putting on the new man they are deceitful. Let us never forget that our chief danger is from within. The world and the devil combined, cannot do us so much harm as our own hearts will, if we do not watch and pray. Happy is he who remembers daily the words of Solomon, ‘He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool’ (Prov. 28:26).”

So let us cry out to God for strength. Let us pray much more often and with much more fervency: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (6:13). Let us remember that the battle is not against the things that are “out there”, but against the things that are “in here”. In this way, we’ll truly be able to “fight the good fight of the faith” and “take hold of the eternal life to which [we] were called and about which [we have] made the good confession” (1 Tim. 6:12).

Teaching our Children

Q. What was the “righteousness” of the Pharisees?

A. The righteousness of the Pharisees was avoiding “*outside* impurities” (like unclean foods).

Q. How did Jesus take away from the Pharisees all of their supposed righteousness?

A. ~ Read and discuss Mat. 15:10-11, 15-20 (pages 1 & 4) See also Titus 1:15 at top of page 6.

~ The source of all our uncleanness is not outside of us, but in our own hearts!

Q. If the source of all our uncleanness is in our own hearts, what difference should this make in our use of things that are not unclean in and of themselves)?

A. ~ Discuss with your children how our hearts can use many different things as *tools* and *expressions* of our sinful nature (T.V., music, internet, alcohol, clothes, food, etc.).

~ See Romans 13:14 and 1 Corinthians 10:12 on page 6

Q. *Remember:* Our true battle is not against what is outside, but what is _____?

A. ~ Our true battle is not against what is outside, but what is ***inside***.

~ Reflect on the quotes from Ryle on bottom of page 6 and top of page 7