

August 30, 2009

James 1 : 16 –21

Do not be deceived, my beloved. Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

Mark 7 : 1-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,

But their hearts are far from me;

In vain do they worship me,  
Teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban' (that is, an offering to God)--- then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come; fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

## **Dirty Hands, Pure Heart**

When I was growing up, at dinnertime my mom would always call us to dinner saying “Wash your hands and come to the table!” We would all make a dash to the bathroom and wash up, then hurry to the table.

With five kids and my dad all trying to wash our hands in a big hurry, I have to admit we didn’t always do the best job. We didn’t often take the time to scrub the backs of our hands or try to get the dirt from under our nails. We were hungry!!

My mom was too busy putting the food on the table to inspect what kind of job we did, so

We often ate with somewhat dirty hands.

I know that at least some of you are horrified.

And I am, too! But we didn’t get sick. We were okay.

These days we have to worry about so many more diseases and infections than we did 40 or 50 years ago! We not only wash our hands, we are told to wash for 20 seconds, covering all areas of the hands and under the nails. We often add to this regimen sanitizing our hands with purell or something similar.

It's a lot of work and time! But we don't want swine flu or any of the other things that are going around these days!

I am reminded of tv shows that show doctors scrubbing up before surgery. They scrub and scrub, fronts and backs of hands, the arms all the up to the elbows. Then they hold their hands up in front of themselves, letting the water drip down off their elbows so that the water does not run back down over the hands, carrying dirt and germs back to the hands, contaminating them.

This is similar to the way that the Pharisees washed their hands before they ate. It was above and beyond what was necessary to be clean enough to eat! They held their hands palm up with the fingers separated and someone poured the water over them. Then they made a fist with one hand and scrubbed the other hand with it, then they changed hands. Then they finished by holding their hands up again as more water was poured.

It was a very complicated procedure that was not described in the Hebrew Bible. The laws of cleanliness do not include it. It was developed by scribes, who added a lot of details to the law of Moses in about 500 BC.

That's why Jesus referred to this washing as "the tradition of the elders," and not the Law of Moses. Most common people did not take the trouble to wash themselves this way. Mark says that "all the Jews" do it but the reality was that only the most observant Jews actually did, because it wasn't necessary for hygiene.

The problem with this ritual cleansing was not that there was anything wrong with washing their hands this way.

The problem was that the Pharisees in this story were more concerned with this ritual than they were with the power of God that was obvious in Jesus!

Jesus had already healed many, many people. He had raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. He had walked on water. He had fed the 5000 with 5 loaves of bread and two fish.

He was teaching all over the countryside and reaching a lot of people, bringing them closer to God.

But instead of listening and learning, many of the Pharisees found reasons to criticize. They had spent their lives being as good, as righteous, as perfect as they could make themselves according to the Law.

To accept what Jesus was saying would have been to say that the Law was not important, that it didn't matter, that everything they had done all their lives was a waste.

If all of these common people who had not been so careful to follow all of the Laws were suddenly going to be part of the Kingdom of God, then what was the point? Where did that leave the Pharisees?

Either out in the cold, or in the Kingdom with all of

THOSE people!

Either way was not acceptable to them. They felt they HAD to be right! Otherwise, their entire lives meant nothing! Everything they thought was important would mean nothing!

So that meant to them that Jesus had to be wrong, no matter how much evidence there was that he really was holy, that he was from God, that he WAS God!

So they kept trying to prove that he was wrong every chance they got by asking him questions meant to show that he didn't know the law, the law that they believed came from God, for the purpose of bringing people closer to God.

Without the law they would be lost, they wouldn't have any way to know if they were doing the right thing, the Godly thing.

The Law, to them, had become God. It was what gave their lives meaning. Their purpose became, not to become closer to God, but to become perfect in following the Law.

And Jesus pointed that out. He told them straight out that they were ignoring the commandment of God to follow the tradition of the scribes and Pharisees who lived years before. The tradition became more important than the Ten Commandments.

To the point of breaking the commandments.

But remember, this is from the Gospel according to Mark, gospel meaning good news. So where is the Good News in this story?

Jesus totally takes the Pharisees apart, putting them in their place, turning their world upside down by making their mistake very clear, very obvious.

What's so good about that?

Well, maybe not for the Pharisees, unless maybe some of them had a flash of understanding.

But for everyone else, for all the common people who didn't follow all the traditions, all the rituals, or the laws to the smallest detail, it was very good news!

They no longer had to feel guilty for not washing their hands following the ritual.

And for the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people who were the first hearers of Mark, it was very good news! Particularly the dietary restrictions were set aside as unimportant. Christians did not have to be Jewish as well!



They could be Greek or Roman or Asian, eating their favorite foods, even if those foods were forbidden by Jewish law!

Good news! Freedom! Good news then, and good news for us today.

What goes into the mouth does not defile. Food goes into the stomach, which has nothing to do with the heart or the soul. But what comes out of the mouth

What comes out of the mouth begins in the heart. And the heart is where all evil intentions come from.

So it's good news, but it also carries with it much more personal accountability.

When Jesus said that the commandment says "Do not murder" but even being angry with a brother is a sin, and "Do not commit adultery" means not even lusting in your heart, he was holding us to a much higher standard of morality.

You can hate someone without killing them. You can lust without committing adultery, after all. So you can obey the commandments without being clean and innocent in your heart.

It's a whole lot harder to have a pure heart than it is to have clean hands!

The law has its purpose, its place. It's not a bad thing to follow the laws of God, as long as they provide a foundation for a closer relationship with God. All that purity on the outside also needs to carry over to the inside. The Pharisees were guilty of pride, of being less than loving, of selfishness.

The same types of sins that Jesus lists -----fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly ---all grow out of pride, out of selfishness, out of the refusal and failure to love as Jesus loved.

The Pharisees were messed up. They had lost their moral compass and gotten their priorities upside down. And, in the end, this is why Jesus Christ was crucified---because they just didn't get what Jesus was saying-----that to love God and love others was the highest priority, the most important thing in life.

Now, it's easy for us to say all kinds of bad things about the Pharisees, to vilify them, to blame them and call them names.

But it wasn't just them. Jesus was often appalled that his disciples, the twelve chosen ones, didn't understand! Even Peter one moment saw clearly that he was the son of God and the next moment declared that Jesus must never die on a cross. He only got it in glimpses, in moments of insight, times when he was in the grip of the Holy Spirit, but then he would lose it again. Over and over.

And the truth is that we're not so much different from him!

We understand what Christ was about only in flashes, only in glimpses.

Most of the time we don't get it, either! We want to make all kinds of rules for others. We want to think that WE are doing the right thing and everyone else needs to do the same things we do.

We want to believe that we are God's favorite children because of how much better we are than other people at doing the things we think are pleasing to God.

And the fact is that we don't know. We don't get it. It is part of our human condition that we are selfish, prideful, and incapable of loving the way Jesus does.

So we understand only to the degree that we are open to the love of God, open to the way of Jesus Christ.

We only understand when we are open and aware of the Holy Spirit moving in us, around us, and among us.

The Holy Spirit is the only way that we can overcome our human selfishness and pride and be more like Jesus! Being open to the Spirit makes us aware of the planks in our own eyes and allows us to see the Holy Spirit, the presence of Christ in other people.

And then we won't be judgmental or prideful. We will be capable of loving them as we love ourselves

Loving them the way that Christ loves us----unconditionally, with mercy and grace and forgiveness.

Some of the Pharisees did understand. They came to Jesus in secret and asked him questions. And I am sure their lives were changed forever.

Sometimes we understand, too, and the more we understand, the more we are changed.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, wrote about "going on to perfection." Another way to say it is sanctification. There is a moment when we first accept Jesus Christ into our hearts but if we do not continue on that journey, if we don't continue to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, then we do not go on to perfection. We do not allow our hearts to become purer and purer.

Becoming a Christian is not one “born again” moment.

Becoming a Christian is a lifelong process! All of our lives we need to continue to grow in discipleship, to learn more about God, to become more and more the people that we were created to be.

What comes out of our mouths is still not pure and clean.

What is in our hearts is still defiled. Only Jesus Christ can change that.

And he IS changing that

as we become aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit, we spend time in prayer, in study, in living out what we understand to be the way of Christ.

As we live and grow and follow Christ, we will, as James tells us, “rid ourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness,” and we will “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save our souls!”

Save our souls from the corruption and defilement that no amount of handwashing can get rid of. Only the word of God, the Word of God which is Christ can purify our hearts and save us!

When I was young and coming to the dinner table with dirty hands, my mom didn't make a big deal of it. Maybe she didn't notice, but maybe she did and just let it pass.

But if we argued and whined and picked on each other, she DID notice, and she DID make us stop. Because what was important to her was not how clean we were on the outside.

What mattered to her was that we loved each other in word and deed.

And how we love each other is what is important to God, too.

Amen.

