

# CLEAN HEARTS AND HANDS

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MATTHEW 15:1-20

The Pharisees' emphasis on cleanness should not have been limited to the washing of hands before eating. They should have been even keener with spiritual purity. The hygienic principle should have extended to the source and center of ones being-- the heart. They should have wanted clean hand and hearts.

These truths are obvious in Jesus' response to the Pharisees in the case that they had filed against His disciples. Evident in their charge are the following. One, the elders have established a tradition that before one eats he must wash his hands. Two, your disciples have transgressed this principle. Three, this results in their defilement and four, we want to know why you do nothing about it. Jesus' response is classic! He pointed out that the Pharisees were guilty of a greater transgression in that, while His disciples were transgressing a health tradition established by men, they (the Pharisees) were guilty of transgressing the commandments of God.

Their breach had to do with the matter of parental responsibility. Engraved on the tables of stone was the command to "honor your father and your mother." This command obligated them to not only show reverential respect to their parents, but also to provide for their material needs where and when possible. The Pharisees, however, had carved out an exceptional circumstance where they taught that it was honorable not to honor ones parents. They felt that if a gift intended for ones parents was given to the temple instead, that freed the individual from the divine obligation to care for his parents. Their position was obviously erroneous. One cannot disobey one command of God in order to fulfill another. The command to

give to the temple did not cancel out the command to honor ones parents. Jesus' conclusion was forceful. "Thus you have made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition" (Matthew 15: 6). While the traditions of men might have some social or health merit, the commandments of God are in a completely superior and transcendent category. And thus, if the Pharisees were upset about transgression, they should have been upset at the more serious violation of the lofty command to honor ones parents. They should also have been ashamed at themselves for orchestrating and encouraging such a heartless sin.

The disciples were guilty of no such sin, but merely a violation of a human tradition which had no higher authority than men. This did not defile them as their accusers obviously thought. Jesus revealed this truth to them in the following words: "Not that which goes into the mouth defiles a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defiles a man" (Matthew 15: 11). These words redefined the concept of defilement. The Pharisees were well familiar with the link between the mouth and the belly, but ignorant of the more important line between the mouth and the heart. While the mouth was an entry point to the belly, the mouth was also an exit point for the heart which is the well-spring of ones' life.

Consider the importance of the heart as seen in the part it plays in the following essential acts. We believe with our hearts (Romans 10: 10), we obey from our hearts (Romans 6: 17), we give as we purpose in our hearts (II Corinthians 9: 7), we forgive one another from our hearts (Matthew 18: 35), we sing and make melody in our hearts (Ephesians 5: 19), and we do the will of God from the heart (Ephesians 6: 6). If our hearts are not right, then this affects all of the preceding acts that we render in service to God. It is no wonder that the wise King Solomon

said, “Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life” (Proverbs 4: 23).

So according to Jesus, the Pharisees were majoring in the minor. They emphasized the lesser to the neglect of the greater. They were more concerned with the traditions of the elders than they were with the commandments of God. They were more interested in what went into the mouth, than what came out of the mouth. They emphasized the state of the stomach above the state of the heart. They sought to bring about clean hands rather than clean hearts.

What is the condition of our hearts? Can one find particles of jealousy, morsels of envy and tit-bits of greed? Does the river of God’s truth wash away the litter of racial prejudice, drown the maggots of lust, and flush out the residue of man-made doctrines? These are the things that defile us. May God grant us clean hearts and hands!

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