

# Defilement

Matthew 15:1-20

It's easy to think of the scribes and Pharisees as an impossibly self-righteous sect that neither you nor anyone you respect could ever become—like spiritual orcs. But they probably descended from Ezra, and were a reform movement like the Puritans who set out to turn the people of God back to Him. So what happened? “Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition” (v. 6). Tradition prevailed over truth and twisted what it means to be sinful and righteous before God.

## Dirty Hands

Unlike the crowds begging to touch the hem of Jesus' robe (14:36), the scribes and Pharisees come from Jerusalem to ask Jesus about how His disciples wash their hands before meals (vv. 1-2). Priests in Israel had to cleanse their hands before serving at the tabernacle (Ex. 30:17-21), and lots of things in the old covenant could make you unclean: touching the carcass of an unclean animal or a dead human body (Lev. 11; Num. 19); bleeding or having a bodily discharge (Lev. 15); having a spreading skin disease (Lev. 13-14). The Pharisees wanted to call people back to holiness, and even improve on the holiness described in Scripture. If priests are ceremonially holier than normal people, wouldn't it be good to call everyone to be more like them? Jesus doesn't address this at first but points to their glaring transgression of the word of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment (vv. 3-6). Dependent children honor their parents with obedience (Eph. 6:1-3). One way grown children honor their aging parents is by cheerfully taking care of them. The Pharisees came up with a workaround where instead of using money to care for their parents, they would call it *corban*, money that is dedicated to the God and therefore not available. Jesus quotes Exodus 21:17 to shame them (“He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death” v. 4) for using their traditions to set aside the word of God (v. 6). They read, study, and memorize Scripture, paying lip service to God, making themselves enormous hypocrites like the blind and illiterate leaders Isaiah spoke about: “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (vv. 8-9; Is. 29:13). It might seem like people who talk about God, quote Scripture, and have constant critiques of the church take the Bible too seriously, but in fact they don't take it seriously enough. They swap His commandments for theirs. It's not a case of being mistaken or missing a few things; Jesus says they worship God in vain. The Pharisees elevate their traditions to be on par with Scripture and end up far from God and His gospel. They want to condemn as unclean the one who heals and cleanses the multitudes. Legalism adds laws, rules, regs, and all kinds of traditions to the word of God and thereby neglects the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith (Matt. 23:23). Rather than living *from* identity in Christ by grace through faith alone, the legalist works *to* an identity, a works-based righteousness that always leads to pride or despair.

## Blind Guides

Jesus says it's not what goes into a man that defiles him, but what comes out, and the disciples let Him know this offends the Pharisees (vv. 11-12). “But He answered and said, ‘Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch’” (vv. 13-14). He hearkens back to the parables of the sower and the wheat and tares. Any Pharisee with an open mind would not be there condemning Jesus, certainly not after He just explained how they won't even honor their own parents. They will be uprooted, and the disciples are not worry about it. They shouldn't spend inordinate amounts of time trying to convince those

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who cannot be convinced, and those who follow them are blind as well. This is a culpable judicial blindness, the kind that follows countless unrepented sins and compromises. Remember Lot's wife (Lk. 17:32). Isaiah describes them in the verses just before the ones Jesus quotes: "Pause and wonder! Blind yourselves and be blind! They are drunk, but not with wine; they stagger, but not with intoxicating drink. For the Lord has poured out on you the spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes, namely, the prophets; and He has covered your heads, namely, the seers" (Is. 29:9-10). You wouldn't hire a blind tour guide to point out the sights or a chef with no taste buds. But Harvard just hired an atheist to be the new chief chaplain. Seattle has city council members and a leading candidate for city attorney who have supported defunding (or even abolishing) the police. Blind leaders and blind followers both end up in the ditch. The job of a guide is to lead faithfully, and those who follow have a responsibility to make sure their leader has eyes in his head (cf. Heb. 13:7; 1 Tim. 3:2-13).

## True Defilement

Peter asks for an explanation, and it surprises Jesus he still doesn't understand (vv. 15-16). Whatever you eat goes into your stomach and then "is cast out into the sewer" (v. 17). Mark's gospel says that Jesus thus declared all foods clean (Mk. 7:19). The ceremonial law was given to prepare Israel for Christ, to govern them until their maturity (Gal. 3:24, 4:1-7). You don't give whiskey to a two-year-old, not because whiskey is evil, but because they're not ready for it. The purity laws taught Israel about holiness and the need to be purified from sin. Priests came closer to Yahweh in the tabernacle and temple, so the stricter rites of purification applied to them. But when the second person of the Trinity took on flesh and dwelt among us, He cleansed, healed, and made people whole. He united all of humanity in Himself and brought us to the Father. Defilement is not located in the material of creation. The problem, for example, is not to be found in the chemical composition of marijuana, but in the sinful hearts of people who want to blunt their senses. Peter will receive the message about all foods being clean in a vision, and what it means is that the Gentiles have equal access to God and don't need to become Jews (Acts 10:9-48). No food that you can put into your body will defile it: "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man" (vv. 18-20). In addition to evil thoughts and blasphemies, Jesus cites the 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> commandments, driving home the point that everyone is defiled themselves. How much attention do you pay to what goes into your bodies versus what comes out of your heart? If we are honest about where corruption comes from, we will be serious about our need for the grace of God and less concerned about appearances. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:8-9). Jesus died for sin once and for all, and when we come to the Father through Him in honest confession, we are cleansed, forgiven, and restored. All things are new.