

From Blindness to Cleanliness

Matthew 14:34-15:20

11 February 2018 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Idea: When we focus on external things to make us holy, we're blind to God's word and lose sight of Jesus who cleans us from the inside.

Big Question: How we can be clean in the presence of a holy and just God?

Introduction

Some people subscribe to the motto,

Tidy desk, tidy mind.

Some of you are vigorously nodding your heads in agreement (at least on the inside).

You can't stand things being placed haphazardly around you.

When there's a place for everything and everything's in its place, you feel like you're clean, happy, motivated and healthy.

If that's true, then one look at my office – I didn't dare put up a photo – will tell you that I'm in desperate trouble.

On the other hand, others would argue that:

A clean, uncluttered desk is the sign of a sick mind!

The argument goes that creative people don't like to live amongst straight-jacketing order.

Creative minds are rarely tidy.

The great scientist Albert Einstein is said to have quipped:

"If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, then what are we to think of an empty desk?"

What could all this possibly have to do with the Bible?

While there's some confusion between these two perspectives about exactly what a clean or a cluttered environment means, there's one thing that both sides of the fence agree on.

Whether you're a neat freak or a creative slob, how we function in the world is driven by what's inside us.

That's the point that Jesus makes in our passage today.

How can you possibly be a good person?

How we can be clean in the presence of a holy and just God?

We need to be cleaned on the inside.

Outline

When we focus on external things to make us holy, we're blind to God's word and lose sight of Jesus who cleans us from the inside.

We're going to look at three groups of people in this passage.

There's people who are:

- Not Seeing our Problems as a Problem (14:34-36)
- Seeing our Problems are External (15:1-9)
- Seeing our Problems are Internal (15:10-20)

Not Seeing our Problems as a Problem

The first group are a people who don't even see their problems as a problem.

You might remember from last week that Jesus sent his disciples ahead of him across Lake Galilee.

They got caught in a massive storm, only to find Jesus coming out to meet them in the middle of it... walking on water.

Jesus is now in the boat with his disciples and they finally make land on the near Gennesaret.

Jesus is a well-known identity in this part of the world, which means that he's immediately recognised.

It's not long before the word gets around that he's in the 'hood.

The famous miracle worker has turned up on their doorstep and everyone wants a part of the action.

From those that have a common cold to people who have had a disability from birth – anyone who's sick is brought out to meet Jesus.

One of the unwritten laws of Australia is that you wait for your turn in a queue.

Cutting in front of someone in a queue is just about the unforgivable sin.

I reckon that there probably wasn't a queue that day though.

Everyone was jostling to get close to Jesus so they could be healed.

Word had probably got out about how Jesus healed the woman who'd been bleeding for twelve years in chapter 9.

All she had to do was touch his cloak and she was immediately healed.

They beg Jesus to allow them to do the same thing.

All they wanted to do was touch the edge of his cloak to be healed.

That shows Jesus' amazing power, but it also shows how profoundly disinterested they were in Jesus himself.

The only part of his ministry they're interested in is getting healed of their physical ailments.

That was their sole focus.

They just wanted to tap to his power by touching his clothing.

Would it have made any difference to them whether Jesus himself was there or not?

It don't think so.

They couldn't see the depth of their problems, that their issues went deeper than their sickness.

At the same time, Jesus didn't turn them away.

These people would've been outcasts, untouchables.

Most Jews wouldn't go near them because they'd become unclean just by touching them.

Not Jesus.

He doesn't put up a barrier – he allows them to touch him anyway.

He's the Messiah who helps everyone where they're at, caring for everyone.

These three verses at the end of chapter fourteen are the context for everything that happens in chapter fifteen.

Unclean people come to be healed by Jesus, but their interest is limited to their physical condition.

That's as much as they think they need Jesus for.

Seeing our Problems are External

It was at that time that Jesus is met by a delegation of Pharisees (who were very religiously devoted people who had other jobs) and Scribes (who were professional Bible scholars).

They don't just happen to run into Jesus in the middle of nowhere.

This is an investigation team (probably full of religious bigwigs) sent down from the big smoke of Jerusalem.

They've come to check up on the ministry of Jesus and find out if it's legit, in keeping with Torah.

They ask question of Jesus, but really it's an accusation.

Don't you hate it when people do that?

They've clearly got a problem with him, but their question isn't even about him.

It's about his disciples.

Verse 2:

Matthew 15:2 (NIV11) ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

That sounds pretty disgusting, don't you think?

Jesus' disciples weren't washing their hands before they ate.

We live at a time when people are obsessed with cleanliness.

It's no longer enough to wash your hands before you eat.

You've got to carry around a little bottle of alcohol too.

No wonder there were concerns about their hygiene.

It wasn't hygiene that was bothering them, though.

They were concerned about the disciples not being ceremonially clean.

After the people of Israel returned from exile, there was a movement of people who were determined to make sure that they'd never get kicked out of their land again.

There was a new wave of enthusiasm for the Scriptures, launched by Ezra the priest – who we looked at last year.

They started reading the Scriptures and copying them so that people had access to God's words.

But in their enthusiasm, they went further than that.

The scribes made comments from the rabbis to help people understand the Scriptures better.

They were kind of like the notes at the bottom of a study Bible.

Just like the notes in a study Bible, they were often much longer than the Bible text itself.

These traditions and customs described in minute detail how to go about living life in a godly way.

One of these traditions was that it was necessary to wash before you eat.

Mark gives us a little bit more detail:

Mark 7:3–4 (NIV11) ³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

You might be thinking, “Why did that make that up?”

The thing is that they weren't trying to make things up.

Quite the opposite. Most of them were trying to take God's word seriously.

So, they took commandments that were meant to be applied to the priests when they were working in the temple and applied them to everyone all the time.¹

The tradition didn't just say that you have to wash, but also how to do it.

If you wash one hand first and then the other hand, you'd be clean.

Wash at them both at that same time though, and that's not good enough.

And not just before you eat, but some of the stricter teachers also said that you needed to wash in-between courses of a meal.

Jesus doesn't deny the accusation.

Instead, he answers by going on the attack, showing them their own inconsistency.

The disciples mightn't be following the traditions, but their traditions were causing them to break God's commands.

Matthew 15:3 (NIV11) ³ Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"

Jesus lifts his argument straight from the Ten Commandments.

The fifth commandment says to honour your father and mother.

We often reduce that down to a commandment for everyone under eighteen and apply it by saying that you need to listen respectfully to your parents' opinions.

Jesus shows us that it means that, but also more than that.

It also means looking after your parents' needs and caring for them.

He also quotes from Exodus 21:17.

This verse says that you mustn't curse your father or mother.

And the consequences were very serious indeed!

Exodus 21:17 (NIV11) ¹⁷ "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death."

The law says that parents are to be honoured, respected and looked after.

But you say that if a gift is devoted to God, then it can't be used to help your parents.

Here's the situation.

People could dedicate some of their estate to God in a process called 'Corban'.

It was kind of like making a bequest in your will.

It meant that money was dedicated to be used in the temple, but only once you died.

You were allowed to use it in the meantime but no one could take it off you because it was dedicated to God.

This was a well-meaning rule designed to stop people ripping off God.

Yet these rules could also be used by people as a vehicle for greed.

Some people figured out that if you dedicate your stuff to the temple, then you don't have to support your parents.

And then when their parents passed away, they'd "un-corban" their assets.

They were robbing their parents under the guise of being generous to God.

But what's even worse is that, whether from good motives or ill, they were letting their own tradition trump what God had said.

Verse 6:

Matthew 15:6b (NIV11) Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

It's really important that you see that Jesus isn't just saying that having traditions is wrong.

The problem was that these rules overturned what God had said.

In theory, the tradition was almost, but not quite as important as the canon of Scripture.

In practice, tradition trumped Scripture.

Many of us like to think that we don't have traditions.

"We're people who simply follow the Bible!" we might say.

But, of course, we do have all kinds of traditions.

We all have traditions – even if that's the tradition of having no tradition.

Traditions can be great when they're a rich pattern of doing things in a good way.

We have all kinds of traditions in our church.

From the way we run church to the way we run home groups.

We have traditions about the music we sing or don't sing.

There's traditions about how and when we celebrate the Lord's supper.

However, no matter how good those traditions might be, they're always up for review against the Bible.

Our traditions only to serve us well when they line up with God's Word.

The problem is when we don't critically assess our traditions against the Word of God.

I hope that no tradition in our church is off-limits.

That things can't be changed "because we've always done them that way."

Now, wisdom says that we need to carefully balance wasting time going over the same things over and over again with maintaining the status quo.

But we must always be open to being changed and corrected by God's word.

The Scribes and Pharisees determinedly insisted that they were just following the Scriptures.

They weren't. And that makes them hypocrites.

Jesus quotes from Isaiah and applies it to them in verses 8 and 9:

Matthew 15:8–9 (NIV11) ⁸ " 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' "

Jesus isn't saying that they're like the people in Isaiah's day.

He's saying that they're same group Isaiah was talking about.

Jews from Jerusalem with a religion characterised by external things.

See, when you press a little deeper, you find that the things they were concerned about were all external.

Going to the temple, tithing and making sacrifices.

Singing Psalms and making noise to God.

They had all these rules and they thought that if they kept them, then God would be pleased with them.

Yes, they kept the rules.

But they were human rules, not God's rules.

Their worship was in vain because all these external things aren't enough.

When you just focus on the externals, you invariably miss the Word of God.

They were more interested in looking good than being good.

Far greater weight was placed on looking like they were right, than having the right attitude to God.

God doesn't want mindless, external faith driven by human rules.

It's not a coincidence that cults focus on external things.

Cults put a lot of emphasis on keeping rules that go beyond the Bible.

Mormons focus on being meticulously groomed and making sure that the grounds of their meeting houses are carefully maintained.

Men who are Jehovah's Witnesses always visit you with a tie on, even though just about no one actually wears ties anymore.

The emphasise the external rules and use them as a measure that they're rule keepers, right before God.

Again, it's not that these things are wrong in themselves.

The problem is when we focus on these things as a sign of doing what God wants, we miss what the Word actually says.

When we focus on human rules, we miss Jesus.

We're not immune.

We have a church culture that values "good teaching".

We put a lot of effort into Bible teaching, devoting a lot of resources to teaching God's word – and rightly so.

But we need to be careful of thinking that hearing a "good sermon" is enough.

But it's not.

Hearing a sermon isn't enough.

Good teaching that isn't applied, that hasn't really penetrated our hearts, isn't acceptable worship.

Good teaching turns into action and results in changed lives.

The Scribes and Pharisees thought that they had godliness nailed because of all the rules they had.

Think about the question they asked Jesus, though.

They come and ask about his disciples' washing habits.

It really was the wrong question that they were asking, wasn't it?

Jesus had walked on water.

He miraculously fed tens of thousands of people.

After all of Jesus' ministry, that's what they want to ask him about?

Why his disciples don't wash their hands?

That's how far out of sync they.

We need to be very careful that we're not making human rules that contradict the Bible.

That we're not just focusing on conforming to external, man-made rules rather than what God has said.

That just won't do.

When we focus on God's word, we see that we need more than just external change.

Seeing our Problems are Internal

Jesus goes on to show that external, human rules can't make us right with God.

We have an internal problem that needs fixing.

He calls the crowd to gather around.

I think this is the same crowd who were bringing him people to be healed.

He tells them this key principle:

Matthew 15:10–11 (NIV11) ¹⁰ "Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them."

For all their commitment and determination, that's where the Scribes and Pharisees went wrong.

They were focused on eliminating external things from making them unholy.

The disciples come to Jesus really worried.

They recognise that what Jesus is teaching goes against the very core of what the Scribes and Pharisees have been teaching.

And they're offended because of it.

No wonder, he just called them a bunch of hypocrites.

Oh, the scandal!

Just about the worst thing you can do today is offend people.

I really like verse 12 because it resonates so strongly with our culture today.

Matthew 15:12b (NIV11) "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"

I don't think that it's right to say that Jesus didn't care about offending people.

He didn't go around trying to be obnoxious and get up people's noses for the sake of it.

However, when the truth needed to be spoken, he didn't hold back either.

The Scribes and the Pharisees thought they were on the right track.

They were sincere and well-meaning.

However, they were sincerely wrong.

Sincerity is a measure of only one thing – how sincere you are.

Just being sincere doesn't save you.

When Jesus talks about the plant being removed, he isn't talking about just a false doctrine being removed.

It's the people themselves.

Israel is often described as a plant.²

The Israelites were meant to be people who led others towards godliness.

Isaiah 49:6b (NIV11) I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

The scribes and the Pharisees thought they were guides for the blind.

Actually, they're guides who are blind.

They're the blind leading the blind.

This principle that Jesus gives in verses 10 and 11, this parable is quite plain, but not everyone gets it.

Yet, the Pharisees don't. The Scribes don't.

And neither do the disciples.

Peter – as he does a fair bit through this part of the gospel – takes the lead in asking Jesus to explain it to them.

And Jesus gives that really great response: "Are you still so dull?"

He's saying, "Do you still not get it?"

They still don't get it, even after everything that they've seen and heard of his ministry.

The Pharisees are concentrating on the wrong thing.

They're concerned about the external – what goes into your mouth.

In the parallel passage in Mark, Mark says that Jesus was using this to say that all food are clean.

But it's more than that.

Their focus was on external things making them unclean.

Verse 17:

Matthew 15:17 (NIV11) ¹⁷ "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?"

Stuff that goes into your mouth doesn't make you godly or ungodly.

It goes through you and ends up in the toilet.

Most English translations are gutless and even the more literal ones like the NASB don't translate the Greek very literally here.

Here's my more literal translation:

"Don't you get it that all this enters into the mouth, passes into your intestines ending up in the dunny?"

Jesus isn't saying that what you eat and drink doesn't matter at all.
Having too much food and you'll get fat.
Having too much booze and you'll get drunk.
Cigarettes are going to harm your body.
It doesn't change the impact of marijuana on your memory.
He's making the point that what you eat and drink doesn't affect your spiritual state.

The Scribes and Pharisees are worried about mouths.
But they're worried about what goes in.
The idea of something foreign coming in and tainting you.
They should really be worried about what comes out – our words.

When you hear “words”, you might think he's talking about using foul language.
But it's not just that.
Nor is it just degrading the Lord's character.
Or gossiping, or using our words for unholy anger.
Even using our words for unjust criticism.

But wait, there's more.
Our words are a window into the heart.

Matthew 15:19 (NIV11) ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Jesus didn't think that our mouth is connected to the organ we call our heart.
In Jewish thinking, the heart was the place of reasoning, the thought centre.
The words that come out of our mouths give us an insight into what's going on inside.
Our words reveal what we are thinking on the inside.

There are all kinds of theories that do the rounds describing what makes us do bad things.
Other people made me do it.
Freud would say that we do bad things because of our upbringing.

Others would say that it's due to our circumstances.

Or that their brains are broken – that it's just something physically wrong with them.

There could be some truth in all of those and they may be factors.

But the Bible diagnoses the problem very differently.

It says that our greatest problem comes from deep inside ourselves.

It's a problem with our thought-centre.

Our bad stuff comes from inside.

It's not that we're all just good people who sometimes do bad things because of external factors.

We're actually people who are fundamentally broken on the inside.

It's a problem called sin.

Sin is rebellion against God.

We are inherently selfish and determined to ignore what God has said by doing things our own way.

We want to do things our own way, and we make a mess of it.

That might not sit very easy with you.

Jesus is saying something very different from the accepted norm around us.

I was quite surprised to read an opinion piece yesterday by Joe Hildebrand.³

He writes:

Karl Marx once famously observed that capitalism carried within it the seeds of its own destruction but he was wrong. It's not capitalism that's the problem, it's people.

And this isn't some boring hippie rant. It's not climate change that's going to kill us off because it'd be a miracle if we lasted that long. Frankly, we'd be lucky to even make it to a nuclear holocaust.

Unfortunately it's something much more sinister and unavoidable. Indeed, it's the one thing we cannot live without: Ourselves.

People my age like to blame technology for all the world's problems, but in truth that's just shooting the messenger.

All technology has done is give human beings an unlimited capability to do what they have always wanted to.

In the first century, the Pharisees and Scribes were blaming our uncleanness on not washing correctly.

Today people blame our uncleanness on technology.

Joe Hildebrand identifies that it's not actually the technology at all.

It's just the vehicle for expressing our sinful desires.

The problem is internal.

The problem is our hearts and minds which rebel against God.

In Jesus' own words,

Matthew 15:20b NIV11 [E]ating with unwashed hands does not defile them."

The problem isn't an external one, it's internal.

Conclusion

Jesus completely subverts the Scribes and the Pharisees' expectations.

They think they can be clean by regulating their behaviour with rules.

Jesus says that the problem is internal and goes to our very core.

If the problem is an internal one, then what is the solution needed to deal with that?

What you eat and drink won't fix it.

This incident helps highlight the need, but it doesn't actually provide an answer for us though.

This passage does point us to the answer though.

This section is all about who the Messiah is.

Jesus himself is the solution to this great problem.

Jesus is the one who can clean us up from the inside.

That's the whole reason he died on the cross.

Stepping into our place so that we can be washed clean.

Washing with water won't wash us clean.

We need to be washed with Jesus' blood.

That's a very strange-sounding idea.

How does it work?

Jesus' blood can redeem us.

Jesus paid for our sin with his blood so that we can be forgiven.

1 Peter 1:18–19 (NIV11) ¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

This passage show us that the problem of our uncleanness isn't just shown on our desks or in the way we keep our houses.

Our uncleanness goes to the very heart of our being.

Which only makes the solution Jesus gives us even more spectacular.

In the words of the hymn, *Nothing but the Blood*:

*For my pardon this I see –
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
For my cleansing this my plea –
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

*O precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow.
No other fount I know –
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

¹ One example is Exodus 30:17-21.

² Isaiah 5:1-7

³ 'Human Extinction: What Will Actually Kill Us All', accessed 10 February 2018, <http://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/the-one-thing-that-will-eventually-kill-us-all/news-story/5115cdb3d757a2c7794febf72872fef1>.

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Big Idea: When we focus on external things to make us holy, we're blind to God's word and lose sight of Jesus who cleans us from the inside.

Big Question: How we can be clean in the presence of a holy and just God?

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus boldly ministered to people who were outcast and unclean. Do you think Christians are called to do the same thing?
2. What was wrong the question that Jesus was asked?
3. Is Jesus saying that tradition is bad? How should we go about monitoring the spiritual health of our traditions?
4. Is the idea that food can make you unclean out-of-date in our culture?
5. What are some of the different reasons that people might be interested in Jesus?
6. "Jesus didn't care about offending people". True or false?
7. Why does Jesus say our words are so important?
8. What are some of the reasons given for people doing bad things? What do you think Jesus would say about these diagnoses?