

## Pure Religion

How can a person become clean, or pure, in God's sight? What can you or I do to make ourselves presentable in His presence? This was a question that troubled people back in Jesus' day and the question was answered in one of two ways. The Pharisees had an answer that they thought was based in the laws of Moses and it came to be called "ritual washing". Jesus had a very different answer, which we will see in the passages we are looking at today from Mark 7 and 8.

We'll begin the study by looking at the source of the regulations that the Pharisees had adopted as part of their tradition, part of their ritualistic service by which they would honor God. The source is Leviticus 15, a chapter which deals with bodily discharges. The first section, which runs for 15 verses, apparently describes a condition caused by venereal disease, or an STD. And the sections that follow are all dealing in some way with something sexual in nature. In only two of the four conditions described in Leviticus is a sin offering required at the end of the process. And in none of the four is the washing or bathing that is required considered punishment. Rather, they are regarded in the law of Moses as being impurities that should be cleansed before a person takes part in any religious ritual. In each case, there is washing followed by waiting followed by the pronouncement, "this person is now clean" and fully able to enter in to the worship of Israel's God without fear.

The point of these instructions, and ones concerning mold and mildew and other things in Leviticus is that they teach the people that God is holy, that He is pure, and that He can't be approached casually, indifferently, or without proper respect and reverence. The outward purity required of the people of God taught them that they needed to come before God with clean hearts. Going into the presence of God needs a 'separation' from the world of ordinary things and a dedication to the glory of the One we worship. That's what these laws of ceremonial purity are all about.

Now, the washing required in Leviticus 15 is entirely confined to instances of bodily emissions. That is all that the law required and yet, when you come to Jesus' day, the religious leaders are requiring much more. Let's take a look at what they were expecting and where they found their support for making such demands on the people.

You'll need to know a couple of terms. The *Mishnah* is the first major written work that attempted to gather the oral traditions of the Jews, what was known as the "Oral Torah". The Torah, given through Moses, dates back to about the 14th century B.C. and the Mishnah was written out at the beginning of the 3rd century. So there are at least 1500 years of oral tradition that developed around the Torah and around the religious practices of the Jews. The Mishnah is the first major written work of Rabbinic literature.

The second term is the *Talmud* which contains both the Mishnah and the *Gemara* which is like a commentary on the Mishnah and which dates from about 500 A.D. Long after Babylon ceased to exist as a political entity, the Jews referred to the area of modern Iraq as Babylonia and so the main Talmud is the Babylonian Talmud, although there was

an earlier Jerusalem Talmud as well. The entire Talmud is over 6200 pages long and contains the teachings and opinions of thousands of rabbis dating from before the time of Jesus until the fifth century. It deals with a wide variety of topics, including the law, Jewish ethics, philosophy, customs, history and many others. It is the basis for all codes of Jewish law today and is widely quoted in rabbinic literature -- rabbinic literature is whatever is written by rabbis.

The primary reason for writing everything down came as a result of the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. and the barring of Jews from Jerusalem 65 years later. Without a central place of study and teaching, there was a need for some standards, some degree of unity, in what the Jews believed and taught. This wasn't easy to achieve, because there were different schools of thought among the Jews themselves, different lines of interpretation among noted rabbis. For example, the two most famous schools, the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel, were opposed on various doctrines of their faith. But, in general, all opinions, even diverse ones, were recorded in the Talmud.

According to the Babylonian Talmud, Solomon began requiring people to wash their hands before eating the meat of the sacrifice in the temple. It seemed like a small thing at the time and was enacted as a safety measure. But fast forward until today, and look at the list of things that present day Jewish law requires of people (among Orthodox and Conservative Jews):

- a. washing of hands when one wakes from sleep, poured out from a vessel three times, back and forth, over each hand. This is said to remove an evil spirit from a person's fingers.
- b. washing of hands before prayer
- c. washing of hands when a person touches sweat on his body, touches private parts or crops fingernails.
- d. washing of hands when one leaves a cemetery.
- e. washing of hands before breaking bread served in one's supper
- f. washing of hands after eating a meal where the salt of Sodom was served at that table
- g. washing of hands prior to pronouncing a blessing on the people.
- h. wash hands after touching a part of the body normally covered, including back, scalp and inside the ear
- i. wash hands after touching leather shoes
- j. wash hands before doing the work of a scribe

How did we get from Solomon requiring that people wash their hands before eating the meat of sacrifice to all these other reasons for washing the hands? The Talmud used the requirement for washing hands that we saw in Leviticus 15:11 as a "hint" for general hand washing law. Instead of exegesis, which looks for the exact meaning of the words and how to apply them, the rabbis used a different way of interpretation called the "hint". They imagined that the idea of hand-washing on a broad scale was suggested by the examples of its requirement by priests and other officials. And they made it a law, not a suggestion, and compared eating without washing hands to unchastity, risking divine punishments such as instant death or poverty.

Although this was still oral law - none of it was yet written down - in Jesus' day, it was considered very important, especially by the party of the Pharisees; they seemed most concerned about keeping up the traditions and rituals that the rabbis before them had argued for. Every period in history has its issues and later generations think they were silly -- imagine what future generations will think of our issues! But in the time when Jesus ministered, this was the height of serious religion. Before you broke bread, you poured water over your left hand, then over your right hand, then over your left hand, then your right again, then one more time over your left and once more over your right -- and this was supposed to show that you truly honored God and respected His holiness.

That's a lot of background, but I hope it will help us to realize that Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees over this issue was not a trivial thing, certainly not in the context of that period of history. Let's get to it:

*One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to confront Jesus. They noticed that some of Jesus' disciples failed to follow the usual Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating. (The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions. Similarly, they eat nothing bought from the market unless they have immersed their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions they have clung to -- such as their ceremony of washing cups, pitchers and kettles.) So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked Him, "Why don't your disciples follow our age-old customs? For they eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony." (Mark 7:1-5)*

You can see from this opening paragraph that the Pharisees had an agenda - they had come from Jerusalem to confront Jesus. They hadn't come out of curiosity or to reason with Jesus, but their purpose was antagonistic - they were going to pick a fight - and they found a suitable topic to fight about right away. They noticed that some of Jesus' disciples didn't do the ritual wash before they ate. To us it seems like a non-issue, but to the Pharisees it would be up there with adultery, stealing or murder. The handwashing was a sacred duty to these men and overlooking it was simply not done.

About half of this section is in brackets which enclose an explanation of the Pharisees' traditions regarding hand washing. They pour water over cupped hands before eating. They put their hands right into a container of water before eating something they've bought at the market. They have ceremonies for washing cups, pitchers and kettles. This is a big deal, if only because they spend so much time and specific ritual on it and expect others to do the same. Apparently, some of Jesus' disciples weren't motivated to follow the lead of the Pharisees.

*Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was prophesying about you when he said, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away. Their worship is a farce, for they replace God's commands with their own man-made teachings.' (Isaiah 29:13) For you ignore God's specific laws and substitute your own traditions."*

*Then He said, "You reject God's laws in order to hold on to your own traditions. For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death.' But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, 'Sorry, I can't help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I could have given to you.' You let them disregard their needy parents. As such, you break the law of God in order to protect your own tradition. And this is only one example. There are many, many others." (7:6-13)*

Now we see Jesus wading into this hornet's nest of time-honored traditions, this fortress of expectations that set the Pharisees apart as a special group of pure and devout religious observers. These were the people who respected God's holiness more than any others, and they showed it by the vast numbers of traditions that they kept. They were several notches above everyone else in terms of sincerity and pure devotion to God, and Jesus exposes them as hypocrites.

Why? What could possibly be wrong with being so devoted to purity, to holiness, that you would observe hundreds of rituals that said, "God is holy and we should not presume to come to Him in an unworthy, impure way"? That just sounds right, and it has sounded right to many of the Jews for hundreds of years. Why would Jesus undermine such a desire to show respect for God?

Here are three reasons Jesus would have objected to the Pharisees' approach to God.

1. It wasn't honest. He reveals their dishonesty with one example of substituting a tradition for the plain requirements of God's law. The law said, "Your parents will need you to care for them in their old age and you are responsible to do that." The traditions said, "If you vow to give the money to the temple, or to the religious leaders, that you would have used to support your parents, that's okay." So they do away with God's requirements for their own benefit - and Jesus says there are many examples of them doing this kind of thing - holding to their traditions instead of to God's laws.
2. Secondly, this devotion to rituals externalizes one's faith - makes it all about what's going on outside and leaves the heart untouched. The Isaiah passage that Jesus quoted says, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away." True religion will show itself in outside behaviors, but its source, its inspiration, is firmly planted in a person's heart. The Pharisees could actually become cold and legalistic in their approach to God unless they loved Him - and here we see that they had allowed rituals to become more important than love.
3. A third reason for Jesus rejecting the Pharisees' definition of purity is that it made it so hard for the ordinary person on the street to approach God. You would always be thinking, "Did I do this right or did I follow the rules closely enough so that I could pray this morning and for God to hear and to answer me?" Approaching God would become a big mountain to climb and most people would quickly abandon the task because it's so intimidating. Jesus would never approve of something that kept people away from His Father.

*Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. "All of you listen," He said, and try to understand. You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do." (14,15)*

The disciples want Jesus to explain this to them and He answers them with these words:

*Don't you understand either? Can't you see that what you eat won't defile you? Food doesn't come in contact with your heart, but only passes through your stomach and then comes out again. (By saying this, He showed that every kind of food is acceptable.) And then He added, "It's the thought-life that defiles you. For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, eagerness for lustful pleasure, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you and make you unacceptable to God. (7:18-23)*

The whole history of the development of the traditions that bound, and still bind, orthodox Judaism to a series of rituals by which they practice their religion is about externals, about doing things that human beings have thought of as being acceptable to God. God's own revelation says, "I'm much more interested in your inner person and I want permission to cleanse your heart." Jesus is clearly saying in this passage that the inner life, the thoughts that produce all the evil that we do, are the things of greatest importance to God. But He also says that those evil thoughts make us unacceptable to God. Before we act out of our pride or lust or anger or greed, we have thoughts that fall short of God's holiness. We can't wash our hands enough, or wash our hearts enough, to clean up that mess. Only God can cleanse us and He does that work through the forgiveness that Jesus purchased for us at Calvary. He does that work through the convicting and healing presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. He does that in us so that we can be prepared to honor Him on this earth and glorify His Name through all eternity.

Let's look at some applications as we close:

1. Human beings have an inclination towards being religious. It's easy for us to sit back and laugh at the Pharisees or others who think that they could please God by pouring water into cupped hands before eating, but we do similar things. We think that God might be impressed by small acts of obedience while we're resisting Him on some bigger areas of our lives. We think He has to do good for us if we give up something for lent or give a 2% tithe or tell someone that we'll be praying for them. In other words, we are easily impressed by our small sacrifices and we think that God probably is as well. And if we are looking good to the people around us, then does it matter if our hearts are hard, if we harbor unforgiveness, if we don't make any effort to resist temptation? Being good, which is what the Pharisees thought they were being, doesn't help at all if our hearts are cold towards God.
2. Heart issues are hard for us to evaluate. I've talked with people over the years who feel unable to forgive someone for some hurt they have experienced. But instead of acknowledging that their failure to forgive is wrong, they will usually spend the first part of any conversation trying to justify it. We think that life should be fair, even

though we know it's not, and when unfair things happen to us, we want justice more than we want to extend forgiveness. Somehow, in the midst of our self-justification and rationalization, we fail to see the state of our heart and we also fail to do what needs to be done to make it whole again. So, I'm going to suggest that we take time to ask the Lord to examine our hearts - like David did in Psalm 139 - and see if there be anything in us that needs to change ... and then ask Him for help to change it.

4. A third application is that we be careful what we give mental attention to. What we think about, Jesus says in this passage, will eventually come out in words and actions. Don't let your thoughts stay in areas that will not be healthy for your spiritual life, your marriage and relationships with your children, or in relationships you have at work or elsewhere. Don't keep thinking about things that aren't good, aren't wholesome, don't produce life and joy and godliness in your character.
5. And a fourth application today: don't blindly follow traditions that have been passed on to you, even if they've been passed on by people you respect. We humans have a tendency to value and to practice what we're familiar with - and that isn't always what God wants from us. So, be willing to challenge old ideas, especially the things you just do from habit. If you find that you're becoming religious in doing the same old things the same old way and you're not finding life in those things like you once did, think about how you might do them differently. If you come to church distracted and annoyed, for example, take 10 minutes to pray and worship before you get into the car. Find fresh ways to spur yourself on. Recover the adventure of finding the life in the Spirit and walking closely with the Lord. Enjoy the journey!