

Clean and unclean

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Preacher: Jerome Peirson

[0:00] Well, the passage that we're considering this evening comes directly after some of the most well-known and well-loved miracles in Jesus' ministry.

! The preceding passages that were preached last week, they describe some of the most dramatic and vivid demonstrations of Jesus' power, compassion, and his utter uniqueness. We see in those passages the soaring heights of his ministry, in his feeding of the 5,000, in the walking on the water, and the miraculous ability to heal by just being touched.

Well, in the passages we're considering tonight, we see quite a contrast. We do see Jesus' greatness. We do see his power.

However, Jesus is back in the gritty, adversarial atmosphere of conflict, of controversy with the Pharisees.

Now, we've been seeing throughout Matthew that Jesus' life was punctuated by conflict, allegations, and controversy.

[1:28] We've become familiar with the Pharisees as they feature significantly in Matthew. And we can often think of the Pharisees in terms of a distant cultural and historical sect that are quite far removed from anything to do with us.

And when we do apply them to our religious life now, we tend to think of them in light of those religious zealots, or those sects that we know today that are opposed to free grace and the gospel. So when we think of the Pharisees, they're very much out there. And the way we apply them, it's very much out there. And that's a good application, and we should do that.

But tonight, I think it would be helpful for us to remember, even as Christians, there's a Pharisee in each and every one of our hearts.

Because of sin, because of the fall, there's that Pharisaical spirit that lurks within each and every one of us, to differing degrees. But tonight, let's think about that a little bit.

[2:34] And it's true that some denominations, some religious systems, they may be more prone to the Pharisaical trait. However, I think we'd be well to consider the dangers out there, but also in here tonight for us.

The spirit of the Pharisee touches the lives of ordinary Christians like you and like me. And I'd like us to look at these passages under three heads. Firstly, a question about man-made tradition.

Secondly, a response from the law of God. And thirdly, the true source of defilement. And if you like, that third point is kind of the theme of the whole sermon.

So firstly, a question regarding man-made tradition. As we read the text, there's almost a sense of foreboding, isn't there, when we hear the Pharisees and the scribes, they're coming to see Jesus. You know what will follow is not going to be the devotion and the love that was shown to Jesus by those who had previously been healed and were just reaching to touch his garment.

[3:44] Again, we see this really stark contrast. And now it's interesting to me that the frequent controversy we see Jesus having is with religious leaders.

These were the scholars of the day. These were learned men. They were very, very skilled in the matters of the law. They were a kind of holiness movement.

The word Pharisee, I think it means to be kind of set apart unto God. So when it came to zeal, when it came to holiness, these guys were serious. Now, these Pharisees coming to see Jesus, they were likely to have been an organised delegation coming from Jerusalem.

They were organised. They had intent. They had purpose. And any of you who followed this series understands that as the Pharisees, they were jealous and they were very threatened by Jesus. And they were fully committed to destroying him. They wanted to discredit him. They wanted to accuse him. They wanted to malign him and his ministry.

[4:54] So they confront Jesus with this, it seems bizarre, this question that seems so far removed from us. For why do your disciples not wash their hands when they eat?

Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat. So we need to ask ourselves, what's going on here?

We need to understand hand washing in its context. We need to understand the allegation that's been levelled against Jesus and how they're trying to discredit him.

Now, if you take a cursory glance at the text, and I remember reading this as a new Christian, I literally thought this was about medical cleanliness, that this was about hygiene.

It was something a bit like when your mum and dad, or for those of us that are parents, say to your children, make sure you wash your hands before dinner. For those of us who are parents, this is not a bad thing.

[5:56] It's good practice. So I wouldn't dissuade you from doing that in this sermon. This is not a matter of hygiene. In the medical sense. It's not about removing bacteria from your hands to ensure you don't get poorly or food poisoning.

The matter here, what we're dealing with, is ceremonial cleansing. The Pharisees, they're accusing Jesus and his disciples of being ceremonially unclean.

They're thinking, you're a true rabbi. You're committed to honouring God. But you don't honour and follow this important tradition that's been passed down by the elders.

If you're so committed to honouring God, why don't you and your disciples wash your hands?

Before eating. So the question here was about authority. Jesus was being accused of not adhering to the authority of the elders.

This tradition of the elders, it was a man-made tradition. It was added to the law of God. Do you recall previously, we've talked about how the Pharisees, when we previously looked at their practices, what they did, they built a fence around the law.

[7:16] And the purpose of doing that, they wanted to keep the law so sacred. It was perverse, because they felt that they had a high view of the law, or actually they had a very low view of the law.

But they built this fence around the law to guard against anyone remotely breaking or coming near to breaking the law. However, by doing that, they totally lost the heart and the sense of what really mattered.

They became utterly fixated on external applications of rules and regulations. Now, they would have said, well, we are, we're fulfilling the law.

They would have argued that this practice was rooted in the law in terms of the Levitical law. They would have probably taken you back to Leviticus 5, 2 and 3, which describes being ceremonially unclean after touching a dead body, a carcass or a Gentile.

They would have likely have said, look, we're surrounded by Gentiles. We need to be practising these ceremonies. But what they failed to see in Leviticus, that was God was teaching his people, they cannot maintain purity themselves.

[8:24] The ceremonial laws in Leviticus concerning contact with animals, dietary requirements, even childbirth, they all foreshadowed, they all typified, they all pointed to what Christ would provide in his coming.

They were pictures of the gospel. They were pictures of what Christ would do. God was speaking in Leviticus to his redeemed people. And he made a very stark contrast in Leviticus of what's holy and what's unholy, what's clean, what's unclean, this distinction.

But the Pharisees, they added to the commandments a multitude of detailed rules, these prescriptions. And these were orally passed down one generation to the next, one generation to the next.

And then they were codified in something called the Mishnah. And a kind of commentary on the Mishnah called the Gemara. Now, we don't usually quote Jewish scripture or literature here at

Calvary, but I thought just to help us just get in the atmosphere and understand what it was that Jesus was dealing with, it would just be helpful to just quote some extracts from tractates in the Mishnah, just so you kind of understand what these Pharisees were about.

So Mishnah 1, if a person pours water over one of his hands with a single rinsing, his hand becomes clean. If over both his hands with a single rinsing, Rabbi Mir declares them to be unclean until he pours a minimum of a quarter of a log of water over them.

[10:05] If he poured the first water over his hand and a splint or a piece of gravel is found on his hands, they remain unclean. Because the latter water only makes the first water on the hand clean, Rabbi Gamaliel says if any water creature falls on the hand whilst they are being cleansed, they nevertheless become clean.

Imagine this is the kind of pedantic, hair-splitting, external regulations that Jesus and his disciples were dealing with.

They didn't understand that the multitudes of washings that we see in the old covenant, they all pointed to the washing of regeneration. They all pointed to Christ. Now sometimes as evangelicals, and I've been guilty of this myself, we can inherit a kind of suspicion of all tradition.

Whenever we hear the word tradition, we become very suspicious. Now it's important to say, and I think it's worthy of just mentioning this, that tradition itself is not a bad thing.

It's the tradition of the elders here that's the issue. Tradition can be a bad thing, it can be a neutral thing, or it can be a good thing.

[11:32] There is such a thing as biblical or apostolic tradition. If you look in 2 Thessalonians 2.15, Paul says, So then, brothers, stand firm, hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

Now recently it seemed, you'll all recall this, it seemed that the whole city was celebrating Halloween. It was really sad. And as Christians, I think it's helpful for us to remember on that day, that day, that's Reformation Day.

That's the day that we can celebrate Luther nailing those feces on the Wittenberg door. And one could argue that the Reformation was a recovery of apostolic tradition.

The way we do worship here is rooted in tradition. There is tradition, what we do here. The simplicity here that we have. We have a kind of liturgy, we have prayer, we read a text in the Bible and we have expository preaching.

In some churches, they catechise their children. And they catechise their adults. We don't practice that here as such. We do dip in and out of that.

[12:45] But that's a good tradition. I'd say that's a biblical tradition. Some churches have a confession of faith. Westminster, Belgium, Heidelberg. Good traditions. You could argue that's biblical.

The tradition of keeping the Lord's Day. That's not a bad thing. So tradition itself isn't bad. The problem here is the tradition of the elders. Now in saying that, we depart from Roman Catholicism, which states that the traditions which the church devises as she goes along and the pronouncements of the Pope, that they have equal authority to the word of God.

We refute that. The word always has authority above the church. But the issue here is not all tradition is bad.

It's man-made tradition that's the problem. Well, my second point is a response from the law of God. Now in verse 3, Jesus responds to their question with a question that very cleverly gets to the heart of the matter.

He turns the tables on them. He frequently answers questions with questions. So he asks, why do you break the commandment for the sake of your tradition?

[14:08] And he then cites the word of God, straight from the fifth commandment. Honor your father and your mother. And then he goes to Exodus 21, 17.

But you say, if anyone tells his father or his mother, what would you have gained from me is given... Oh, sorry. Honor your father and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die. So here he's shining light on their hypocrisy.

He's shining light on their deviation from the word of God as they have placed ultimate authority on their man-made traditions. So the real issue here is what has true authority?

Is it man-made tradition or is it the word of God? The matter of authority is at stake here. Now as an aside, and forgive me, this may not be directly from the text, but I think we can learn here how to be equipped in controversies and religious discussions.

[15:12] It's helpful to Jesus. He always goes to the word of God, doesn't he? He turns to the word of God. He's got such a high view of scripture. I thought about when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness.

What does he do when the devil's tempting him? He turns to the book of Deuteronomy and the Psalms in an offensive against the devil. Now although Jesus is the word of God, in his humanity, he placed himself under the authority of the law and the word.

Isn't that remarkable? When people, they're looking for extra revelation, they're looking for this and that, but Jesus, he had such a high view of scripture. Now I think this area of authority is relevant for us today.

One of the great Reformation slogans was sola scriptura, which means scripture alone. The reformers, like Christ, they knew well the importance of the word being the final and ultimate authority in matters of religion.

Do we base our religious life on the word of God? I believe we do here at Calvary. Now, sola scriptura does not mean that it's just me and my Bible just off on my own in kind of splendid isolation.

[16:29] That's not what it means, you know, with my own kind of way of interpreting it, because it suits me. We don't grow in kind of splendid isolation. Now, I've met Christians like this and they're almost impossible to have any discussions with or reason with because they've just got their way.

We grow in the word of God by the power of the spirit in the fellowship of the church together. The authority of scripture in the Reformation tradition can be directly drawn, I think, from Christ's high view of scripture.

It's sufficiency, it's inerrancy, it's infallibility. The true authority is divine. Not man-made. We also see here there's always a danger of adding, adding to the word of God.

If we attempt to add anything to the perfect word of God and if we supplement it with kind of man-made traditions, whatever they are, we're just loading up more than what is required for people's consciences.

We're leading people away from Christ. It may have the appearance of spirituality. It may be very strict. It may have an appeal to it. But we're just burdening souls.

[17:42] We're pointing them away from Christ, as the Pharisees were. But they weren't just adding to the word, but they were contravening the commandments. What I mean by that is that they were going against the commandments.

They were making void the word of God. And we see here Jesus uncovers the hypocrisy, the utter hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

They're making a show of religion. They're like play actors. They're adhering to the ceremonial rigmarole. The ceremonies don't make us acceptable before God.

Ceremonies don't lead to true conversion. Ceremonies don't communicate grace to us. And we see how the Pharisee religion, it can degenerate into something heartless, merciless.

And Jesus, it's interesting, that he draws this connection between, on one hand you have the hypocrisy, but then on the other hand you see the mercilessness and the heartlessness. And hypocrisy would always go in a very negative direction.

[18:53] Verses 5 to 6 speak of something called korban. Korban. I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly. Now, having read around this, my understanding is it was a type of offering that the Pharisees, they made to God.

It was a kind of, kind of like a consecration or a devotion to God financially. They would give their money or their possessions or land. And this was them showing their zeal, being utterly sold out for God, giving money or land or what have you to the temple.

You see a parallel text in Mark 7. It was a dedication to the temple. Now, what would happen is, these Pharisees, if they had elderly parents that were unwell, that needed help financially, needed their support, they would say something like, well, I'm sorry, Mum, I'm sorry, I'd really love to help you.

But the thing is, I'm just so all out for God. I'm just so dedicated to the Lord. I've just committed all my money. I've devoted all my money to the temple. Very zealous.

Very strict. But what they could do, they could kind of pronounce this korban over the money and it would be released and they could then use it on themselves. So they could kind of have it and they had a kind of situation where they could say, well, it's going to be devoted to God, but we can still access it.

[20:17] But they weren't giving it to their parents who needed it. I mean, the mercilessness of that, the heartlessness. It was a way for them to get out of the obligation of caring for their parents, hence the breaking of that fifth commandment.

How merciless they were in contrast to Christ's wonderful healings we saw, we would have seen last week.

And the grace that Christ shows, the mercy that he shows to us, should mean that there should be a mercifulness in the way we deal with other people.

that we have received free mercy that should flow out of us. And I know because of indwelling sin, that's never perfect and it ebbs and it flows and we could all probably do better. I know I could, but yet we've been shown this grace, this mercy, that the Pharisees, because of their hypocrisy, they were merciless.

When we make things have authority above the word of God in our lives, we can be like them, can't we? We can have this hypocrisy hypocrisy that creeps in, this kind of merciless spirit when we're looking at other people and very critical of them.

[21:32] We're concerned about the outward appearance. If we become off balance with the word and we start just homing in on one aspect of God's revelation, we can become very zealous about certain things.

It can happen. It can happen to Christians. You become zealous about this and then this kind of spirit can creep in, this Pharisaical spirit. I think positively, we all need a well-rounded biblical ministry.

We need to drink deeply from the whole counsel of God to guard against this. Now Jesus then goes on to show how their hypocrisy and giving authority tradition is played out in their religious worship. He quotes Isaiah 29.13. In Isaiah, their worship, the worship just went as far as their lips. Their hearts were disengaged. In Isaiah's day, he was speaking to the people then, they were play-acting.

And just like the Pharisees, they were obsessed with the external forms. The outward forms may have been in place and they may have been good, but they were obsessed with them. And although Isaiah was speaking to the people of his day, Jesus says, he's prophesying to you, the Pharisees.

[22:46] So we get an emerging theme here in these passages that we see a contrast between external and internal. The true religion that is inside the heart that dwells within us and this false external religion.

Now, don't run away with that and think that God doesn't care about the form. He does. God cares about the external. But he detests religion where the heart's not engaged.

God looks upon the heart. The characteristics of the hypocrite can be seen in these passages and we see that they're inside and they're outside.

They don't match up. They're play-acting. They're self-deceived. They love the image of being religious and they love the applause. We know that about the Pharisees. What about us? Can we play at religion?

And I was really challenged by this. Can we hide behind theological knowledge using the right language in prayer? And I think it's particularly applicable to those of us who are in positions of leadership or our leaders or fathers in the home, heads of the home, women that lead in Sunday club or as a church.

[24:03] What about us? We can sing the songs. We can speak the language. We can play at religion. But where are our hearts? Now, no doubt, all of

us at times, like I said earlier, due to remaining sin, we'll be tempted in these areas.

But I think this is a warning for us to really examine ourselves and to run to the cross, run to the grace of the Lord, to have a renewed heart.

And my third point is the true source of defilement. In this section between verses 10 and 20, Jesus is showing his disciples where defilement truly comes from.

And in doing this, he further dismantles the Pharisees' superficial religious practices. Now, before we look at this in detail, I think it's important to note that in the middle of this section, he's questioned by his disciples as they're concerned that the Pharisees were offended.

Then the disciples came and said to him, Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying? I think his response is illuminating and it's worthy of our attention.

[25:21] Rather than being sorry, rather than being, Oh dear, I've offended the Pharisees. And feeling the need to kind of run back to them to kind of apologise and explain himself.

Or trying to make things right. He denounces them in the strongest way. Firstly, he says, Every plant that my heavenly father has not planted will be rooted up.

Excuse me, Alex. Will be rooted up.

He's denouncing them for being self-appointed leaders rather than leaders appointed by God. He goes on to say, Let them alone.

They're blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, they both will fall into a pit. By saying, Let them alone, he's basically telling his disciples to shun them, reject them, to spurn them.

[26:27] And I think here, there's just something here that struck me. We see the importance of the need to denounce false teaching. Now, our religion should not be made up of just negatives and denunciations.

That's not good. But I do think there are times when it's wholly appropriate to denounce what is false. We need to speak of the positives. We need to proclaim what is true.

However, there's a scriptural balance where the prophets, where Paul, where Jesus, they gave attention to denouncing and warning against false teachers. We may need to sometimes offend.

And we mustn't let politeness and man-pleasing hinder us from speaking the truth in love, winsomely in love, and denouncing error. I remember in a previous church we attended, I had a meeting with a leader as I was really concerned about the way they were uncritically promoting certain teaching.

And I thought it was worrying teaching. And they were omitting certain things in their teaching and preaching and important truths. And I think there was a fear of offending people.

[27:43] They wanted to be very seeker-sensitive. Therefore, they were very careful. They wanted to omit certain things. And he said to me something along the lines of we just try and look at the positives in all things.

We want the positives. Don't focus on the negatives. Now that sounds really spiritual, doesn't it?

That sounds really loving. It sounds very compassionate and spiritual. But it's just not biblical.

Christ doesn't do that. He doesn't say, well guys, look, the Pharisees, look, they've got some dodgy teaching, but they've got some zeal. Let's give it to them. They've got some zeal and they're really serious about holiness, so let's just draw on those positives.

You know, you don't hear Paul talking to, you know, when he's denouncing the kind of Gnostic teachers and so forth that say, but they've got some, they're really passionate about what they believe.

That's just, no, he denounces and that's really important and that's actually the loving thing to do.

It's loving. And I couldn't help again thinking there are important applications here for people who are in positions of leadership in the church, in the home, men who are the heads of households.

[28:54] And the Pharisees, they were in a position of leadership, weren't they? And we see here how, the way the leaders go, the people that follow them, they go the same way, don't they?

The blind leading to the blind. So those of us in positions of leadership need to be mindful of that. How are we leading? Because it has a, I think I heard somewhere or read one of the Puritans or something, that rarely does a church or a congregation rise above its leaders.

and something to think about. The Bible speaks of the great responsibility leaders have. And the way we lead has ramifications.

Well, Jesus goes on to explain the meaning of this simple parable, which is the, this is the root issue of the whole section. Jesus explains that true morality, it's not a matter of outward ceremony, but inward.

True moral change does not come from religious rituals, the source of true defilement. It's in here, it's in our hearts. It's a matter of our hearts.

[30:04] Now, I know the world will tell us, you just turn on the news, and the world won't deny that we have major problems in society. I don't think anyone will deny that. But they'll say that the problem lies elsewhere.

They'll say that the problem is political, it's ecological, it's sociological. We just need to get more education. If our children were better educated, we wouldn't have any problems.

It's economic. If we could redistribute wealth, we wouldn't have any problems. Now, there's truths in these things. I'm not trying to dismiss the importance of those things. They're important, but never do you hear that it's the heart.

That's radical, isn't it, actually? You never hear that. And the Pharisees, they totally miss this. I've heard a saying, it's a little bit cheesy, but I think it's really helpful, the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart.

He lists a whole catalogue of sins, which we won't go into now, but it's clear. What he's saying is that sin, defilement, uncleanness, depravity, it comes forth from the heart of man.

[31:16] It doesn't come to man through external means, such as food or external pollutants. I mean, they had a view that if you touched a Gentile and then you touched your food, the defilement would go to your hand, to the food, then it would go to your stomach and then you would be unclean.

They totally missed. And this was made so clear in the Old Testament. This wasn't Christ. Although Christ was bringing in a sense new revelation, it wasn't totally new.

He was following the old paths, the old paths, nothing new. Think of all those places in the Old Testament where it talks about the circumcision of the heart.

Think of Psalm 51, creating me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Jeremiah 414, O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil that you may be saved.

Jeremiah 31, I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts. Ezekiel 36, 26, and I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you.

[32:30] I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

This is Old Testament religion. Jesus is saying we're not sinners because we've committed particular sins.

This is really important. He's saying that we sin because we're sinners by nature. We were sinners before we were even capable of consciously committing any particular sin.

This is the doctrine of original sin. We were born in rebellion and enmity towards God. In Adam, Adam is our covenant head, our federal head, under the covenant of works, fallen creatures.

We see here the doctrine of total depravity or if you prefer radical corruption where every faculty, every aspect of you, every aspect of me has been polluted by sin.

[33:36] and without the cleansing and atoning blood of the cross, we are all totally defiled. That's each and every one of us and every human being that's ever lived and that's why we need a saviour.

That's why the gospel is such good news. The moral change required by God, it doesn't come through kind of tinkering and messing around with rituals and washings and religious ceremonies and repeating certain prayers and man-made devices, concoctions, whatever we can come up with. God wants our hearts. This has really challenged me as I prepare to stand up here and preach to you because it is easy to play at religion and it's easy to slip into superficiality and externals and the spirit of the Pharisee and people of God tonight, as I draw this to a close, most of us here, I believe, are Christians, I know most of you.

I think it would be helpful for us to just come before the Lord in the Lord's Supper tonight and examine ourselves, examine our hearts. It's good.

If any of us are feeling particularly convicted by what's been spoken of tonight, we can go running back to Christ, that fountain, the blood, we can be under the blood and know the cleansing and the forgiveness.

[35:12] Such good news. If you're not a Christian and you're here tonight, you need a new heart and I would just urge you, just urge you, come to Jesus, trust him, repent of your sins, put your faith in him.

this gospel is such good news. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.