

Jesus clean versus religious clean

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 March 2015

Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] Please turn to Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 7. Help us, Lord, to hear your word. Help us not to be hard-hearted, but receptive to you. Amen.

! So here is Jesus being very, very radical on the matter of clean and unclean. And this passage, actually, the more you think about it, touches on some very deep principles, if you might say of religion, or principles of relating to God.

And so if you spell them out, one of the things it touches on is what is the law of Moses really all about, because he's relating to regulations that come initially from the law of Moses.

So the law of Moses is a big part of the Bible. What's it all about? Why is it there? That actually links directly with the bigger question.

Why is there an Old Testament at all? Why is there Israel at all? It's a very big question. And then the question is sort of more philosophical.

[1 : 25] What is the real problem for religion? What is the issue that religion is meant to be dealing with? And then you could make it more specific. The Hebrew Scriptures, that's to say, the part of the Bible that was originally written in Hebrew, what Christians would call the Old Testament.

Of course, Jews wouldn't call it the Old Testament. They'd say it's the Scriptures. Christians call it the Old Testament. What is it actually saying? What are the fundamental principles of the Hebrew Scriptures?

What are the driving convictions of the Hebrew Scriptures? What sort of diagnosis do the Hebrew Scriptures make of the human condition? And what sort of prescription do the Hebrew Scriptures offer for mending things?

So whether you say refraining or whether you say redeeming. What's the answer, what's the answer, in other words? So what is the solution to the problem that's under discussion?

Now, I don't actually think the passage we've got gives us a solution. But at least it gives us a very radical view of what the problem is. So let's, by way of introduction, of what the Hebrew Scriptures say, on this matter of clean and unclean.

[2 : 59] So what does the Old Testament say? That's the Hebrew Scriptures. That is the Word of God. And this business of clean and unclean comes from this part, the first five books, or a subsection of the first five books.

So there they are, the first five books of the Bible. And the portion which is known as the Torah, the Law of Moses, and it does indeed teach a system in which clean and unclean is a very important part.

Now, I didn't go to the trouble of sort of making it click up a bit at a time. Now, oh dear! Now what's happened? I'm completely lost now.

Oh! Maybe I have. Right. That was interesting. Thank you, Ross. Yes, I thought I was clicking the little red light button. So, clean and unclean.

So just a very, very quick reminder of what the Law of Moses teaches about clean and unclean.

You can have clean and unclean food, clean and unclean animals, clean and unclean people, all sorts of things.

[4 : 29] You can divide the world into these areas of, I'm going to slip sideways here, of clean and unclean. So unclean, that is something that intuitively, I think, we either teach our children or we know it instinctively because you teach your children, eww!

You don't touch that. Don't touch the dog's poo. Don't eat the dog's poo. And they get the idea, don't they? They get the idea that there's some things that are yucky and horrible and you don't put your fingers in them and you don't eat them.

I think we get that idea and that's what this thing in the Bible is locking into or perhaps generating. So the idea of disgust.

So, I mean, let's think of something disgusting like dog's poo. If that was put in front of you on a plate, you would be disgusted, wouldn't you? You'd be really, you know, stomach-churningly, yuck, horrible, urgh!

So that's the thought about clean and unclean. Unclean is disgusting. It's defiling. So it does something to you.

[5 : 45] Over and above, just making you react emotionally, yuck. It puts you, if you get contaminated by this, see, that's another word, contamination.

If you get contaminated, then it puts you into a state which disqualifies you in certain ways, puts you into a certain compartment, puts you into a certain condition, which you need to be brought from by being decontaminated.

So you get the same idea in radioactivity, don't you? You've got, you know, after the Chernobyl disaster, all the acid, radioactive stuff fell on people and they had to be decontaminated.

So you've got that thought as well. It disqualifies, and in particular, the sort of uncleanness in the Bible disqualifies people from drawing near to God because we're taught to understand that there's a quality of God which in particular reacts strongly against the uncleanness that attaches itself to us.

So it's the opposite of holiness. Holiness reacts strongly against uncleanness, and it is not possible for uncleanness to come into close contact with God.

[7 : 06] So it brings in the idea of holiness and the need for decontamination, need for cleansing. Okay, that's what, in a very quick nutshell, that's the system that the Hebrew scriptures teach, and it's certainly there in the Jewish religion of the Old Testament.

And you can make it into a little diagram. So here on this side, I put a diagram of things, animals in particular, so if you think of animals, you've got three circles.

In the middle are the holy animals, so they're sacrificial animals. And if you think back to this system, there are animals that are designated for sacrifice.

So you can have sacrificial lambs, sacrificial goats, bullocks, bulls, but you don't have sacrificial fish, you don't have sacrificial monkeys, you don't have sacrificial badgers or squirrels, but only certain animals are sacrificial animals.

So that's one part of the animal kingdom, if you like. And then around the outside are the clean animals, clean, this lot here. So, just putting it very, very briefly, the clean animals are the ones that tend to be as animals ought to be.

[8 : 41] So they do the things that animals should do. And if they're abnormal, then they're not considered clean. So things like the way they eat, if they chew the cud or don't chew the cud or their locomotion, if they have the wrong sort of legs, if they've got too many legs or they move in the wrong sort of way, if they squirm around instead of walking properly, all these things that mean that they're sort of not what they should be puts them into this other area of unclean.

So you have the animal kingdom, sacrificial, clean, unclean. And so, if you are brought up on the book of Leviticus, which a Jewish child would be taught almost first thing that you learn, you'd begin to see the world almost immediately through the spectacles of holy, clean, unclean.

And interestingly, it maps over, or it corresponds to the human race. So you have that portion of the human race which is holy, those are the priests, that portion of the human race which is clean, which is the nation, by which I mean the Jewish nation, and then you have all the rest which are unclean.

So all the rest of, you know, you get Welsh people there, and Scottish people, and Swiss people, and Italian people, and Philippine people, and everybody else there, and that, that, English people, did I say English people?

I should have put them in there first. So they're the unclean, and you have this view of the animal kingdom, and it maps over into this view of the human race, and you may remember that Peter had a vision.

[10 : 29] Do you remember he had a vision about what the gospel does in the way of bringing, making people acceptable to God? So it was, it was really to do with this, but the form that it was put in was this.

Do you remember that? I'm not going to try and give you all the details of it, but it was a vision about creepy crawlies and eating them, and his application was, ah, Roman centurions, I can actually talk to them, and they can become Christians.

Anyway, that's not the main point of this evening, that's just to remind you of how it worked. I might as well stand over here because I can see this better. So, let's look at this particular text then.

So we're in Mark chapter 7, and it begins with a criticism from Matthew, Mark, Mark, the Pharisees and some teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus.

Now when they come from Jerusalem it's always a bit of a danger signal because they're the top, highly qualified teachers of the law, you know, they're the academics, they're the ones who would be on Melvin Bragg.

[11:53] So, these guys have come and you know they're going to ask something. They gather round Jesus and they see some of his disciples eating food, eating bread, literally, so it links with the provision that we had in the previous verses, with hands that were common, unclean, explained, unwashed, didn't wash them in water.

and he says that this is the culture they're in, the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a washing and the NIV hasn't put ceremonial washing because that's what it is.

So, that's their habit, they don't eat unless they have a wash, perhaps quite a thorough wash or maybe a wash up to the wrist, not quite sure about that.

But where does this idea come from? It comes from the tradition of the elders and they hold this strongly and verse 4 it says that when they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash, could be the word baptize, and they hold strongly many other traditions such as the baptizing of cups, pitchers and kettles.

so they're very into this idea of cleanness, avoiding contamination by washing in water.

[13:22] So this shows us, this rests on two assumptions then. Number one, that there is such a thing as pollution, there is such a thing as uncleanness, and that you can get rid of it by washing.

Those are the two assumptions for that. So there's the criticism that the disciples of Jesus seem not to go along with that, and if it's a criticism of his disciples, it's implicitly a criticism of Jesus.

So you're in charge of this lot, why do you let them get away with this, why don't you challenge them on this, why don't you teach them better? So it's really a criticism of Jesus. So here's Jesus' reply, I'm sorry, verse 5, it's made explicit, why don't your disciples walk according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with unclean hands?

That's the criticism. and Jesus comes right back at them with this stinging sarcasm. Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites?

It's really strong. Well did he prophesy about you hypocrites? This people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

[14:49] They worship me in vain, their teachings are but rules taught by men. It's a quote from Isaiah 29 13, and we might as well look back at Isaiah.

Isaiah 29 13, Isaiah 29 says exactly this, the Lord says, these people come near to me with their mouth, and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. That's Isaiah 29 13. If you care to remind yourself of Isaiah 6 verses 8 to 10, this too is in the back of the mind when we're on this line. This is the commissioning of Isaiah, who shall I send, who will go for us? I said, here am I, send me. And in verse 9, he said, go and tell this people, be ever hearing, but never understanding, be ever seeing, but never perceiving, make the heart of this people calloused, make their ears dull, and close their eyes, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, turn and be healed.

And of course Jesus says to his disciples, don't you understand, are you so dull? So it's sort of echoing that situation there. So what Jesus is saying is, you have taken things in the law of Moses and you have extrapolated, so extrapolated, sorry about that word, but it means you take a line that's pointing in a certain direction and you lengthen the line until it goes much much further than the original line did, that sort of extrapolating.

[16:55] And what you do is you've taken things that are in the law of Moses and you've lengthened them out and you've pushed them and you generated rules.

So he didn't say that in the Bible but you've gone off in that direction, you've extrapolated it, made it into a rule and you hold this rule strongly and the accusation of Jesus is that you've done that in

such a way that you have got into conflict with another thing that the Bible says and what you've done is ended up taking your rule and making it contradict something else that God has said in another place and thus you effectively reject the commands of God.

And it's a strong criticism from Jesus. He's saying what you've done is you've got your system of rules which you've built up and built out and lengthened and extended and you are now in a position where what God actually says has become so inconvenient and so unpalatable that you got rid of that so you can hang on to your tradition.

So you've effectively made the word of God into nothing. You've made it pointless. And Jesus is, you see he comes into it so strongly doesn't he?

He says you criticise the disciples and your criticism of the disciples behaviour is symptomatic of your own religion which is drastically falls short drastically it's symptomatic of the drastic shortcoming in your whole religion and Isaiah saw that in his day and he said so this is the word of God through Isaiah look at these people all those hundreds of years before Jesus they honour me with their lips they say all the right things but in their hearts they're far away and when they worship me it sounds great but actually it's completely empty and the reason is that they have done this lengthening and this conflict thing and they've made their rules trump invalidate the word of God and Jesus is really strongly against them with sarcasm you've done a brilliant job of messing up what the

[19:28] Bible is really all about let's look at the next verses which say the same sort of thing but extend it a bit and he said to them using the same idea what a brilliant way you have of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions and then he gives this example right here's something that the Bible says honour your father and mother it says it in the law St.

Moses says it and in another place it says anyone who curses his father and mother must be put to death so that's a strong principle and you have to understand that one of the things the Bible does is give a hierarchy of principles it says this is important but this is more important it's very important that we understand that because we can be Pharisees too as Christians if you see what I mean the Bible gives a system of values let me give you just a very simple example suppose you promised to meet somebody at 11 o'clock for coffee and as you are on your way you see somebody else being mugged and threatened with a knife and you know that if you stop and do anything about it you're going to be late for coffee so you say the Bible says I must keep my word so I will go on and I will let this person be murdered because I don't want to be late for coffee because I'm a Christian and Christians keep their word you understand that that would be deeply wrong wouldn't it because here's somebody's life being threatened and if it's a question of being late for coffee or saving someone's life which is more important you see the Bible would say that saving someone's life is far more important than keeping your word over turning up for coffee now do you see what I mean there's a priority of things and the

Bible teaches that priority that's one of the ways the Bible operates and what they've done here is to completely run a steamroller over that set of priorities deep priority important priority honour your father or mother and they've come up with a tax loophole if you like that's the sort of thing it is verse 11 but you say that when a man says to his father or mother ok I've got some money which is in the bank at the moment and it could help you in your old age you might need it but I'm going to offer it to God so korban is the word for an offering and it's brought over into the New Testament from the Old Testament it's an offering so I'm going to make this money an offering and just to help us Mark translates it into Greek it's a gift korban means gift it's a gift devoted to God so here's this money I'm offering it to

God and the Pharisee the Jewish establishment it's all signed up with them and the treasurer of the Sanhedrin writes some receipts and everything like that and then before anything happens to the money mum and dad get ill need the money to be looked after and so the man goes to the court of wise people leaders and says this is really difficult I know I promised this gift to God in this sense but my mum and dad need it and could I have the money back because my mum and dad need this and the Pharisee says no you can't do that I think God would like you to do that you certainly can't do that it's offered to God no way can you help your mum and dad and Jesus says this is deeply wrong because what you've effectively done is you don't let this person help their father and mother and what you have done is you have nullified see that in verse 13 you have nullified the word of God to nullify you have made it invalid you know an invalid thing is when you sign something up for your credit card and you put the wrong pin number on it and it says no that's not you that won't

happen that won't work that's a pointless thing for you to do nothing doing there complete waste of time and he says that's what you've done with the word of God you've made it something that is pointless useless powerless ineffective waste of time and he says that's what you do by your way of doing religion by this mentality that you have by your traditions that you hang on to so strongly you make the word of God into an invalid transaction and Jesus says and you do many things like that I think there's a real sense of anger and indignation in the way that Jesus speaks you end up declaring the commands of God the word of God invalid so let's move on with this no let's not move on let's just think about this so let's think of there's a principle here a principle of religion it's a principle of revealed religion it's not a principle of Hinduism it's not a principle of Buddhism it's a principle of revealed religion when religion goes wrong what it tends to do is make human traditions push out of supreme place the important principles and commands of

[25 : 40] God so Jesus has put his finger on something really endemic in human situations certainly there in Judaism and it can get into Christianity certainly give you an example so in Roman Catholicism and you may be puzzled about Roman Catholicism because you say I have a feeling that it's not quite right somehow but I've met a number of Roman Catholics who I think are really Christian people and this puzzles me a great deal and it puzzles me a great deal sometimes as well I think it is possible for people to be there in the Roman Catholic Church to have actually got the wrong end of the stick Roman Catholic wise and end up really believing what the Bible says almost by accident but they can be believers but what the system of Roman

Catholicism says if you've got the right end of the stick it actually officially says we govern ourselves by two things two things one is scripture what God said and alongside that the long standing traditions of the church so the official Roman Catholic position we have both these things as authority now in practice what happens is that the tradition pushes out the Bible that's the principle thing in essence that's what's gone wrong in the Roman Catholic church and therefore you have say the worship of Mary where does the worship of Mary come in the Bible it doesn't but as it's come in the tradition of the church over hundreds of years the

Roman Catholic position would be to say okay well that's authority that's true that's because it's in the tradition of the church and what does it say in the Bible that you have priests celebrating a sacrificial mass where does it say that in the Bible it doesn't say that in the Bible but it's come through a tradition so it comes to be the thing where does it say in the Bible that church leaders have to be celibate it doesn't say that in the Bible it's come from somewhere else it's come from traditions and to be perfectly honest I think that when you have a system like that you're in a very great danger of Jesus saying the same thing to you as he said to these people I wouldn't I hesitate to criticize other people's churches it's sort of in a sense that's their business but I would personally be very very fearful if I were in a church situation where the traditions of the past were on a level with the

Bible and therefore in practice the traditions mean that you neglect invalidate the word of God and in case you think I'm just being anti-Roman Catholic I think that Protestants can be just as bad Protestants can have their own traditions which trump the word of God so if you say where does it say that in the word of God it doesn't say that at all but it becomes a tradition and way to you in some situations if you challenge that tradition so let me give you an example the example that the only Bible is the authorised version so some churches would strongly say if you're not using the authorised version you're not using the Bible where does it say that in the Bible it doesn't say that in the Bible is the Bible written in

Elizabethan English no actually it's written in Greek and Hebrew and what does it say about what are the principles we should understand about translation well the principles are that it is in principle translatable into any human language that's what the day of Pentecost teaches because God's praises and his gospel can be apparently transmitted in any language that people can speak and understand and when people start putting down other Christians if they don't use the authorised version I think personally they're coming under the same sort of criticism here you're getting in the way of God by hanging on to something which is a human tradition and so I put on there Protestant Evangelical Super Separatism which will take one strand of teaching in the Bible and elongate it and extend it and push it until it contradicts other powerful and central teaching so what teaching I'm thinking of is the fact that gospel

[31 : 21] Christians have unity in the Lord Jesus Christ there is a unity produced simply because we believe in Jesus Christ through the gospel and you could enlarge on that you wouldn't have to

enlarge too far what would you have to believe about Jesus Christ that he's man and God he died on the cross for our sins or do you have to believe about becoming a Christian well that you're justified by faith alone that you're born again when you believe you could just enlarge on that what sort of God we worship a God who is three persons in one you wouldn't have to enlarge too far to get to a core of biblical belief and somebody who believes that honestly and lives by it you would say you're my brother but there's a sort of super separatism of Christians which says well unless you sing from the same song sheet as we do unless you have the same order of service as we have unless you go to the same conferences that we do

I'm not going to shake hands with you not going to have anything to do with you and I think that runs a risk of this you have a fine way of taking your traditions and making them nullify bring to nothing the word of God well it's sort of dangerous territory isn't it but Jesus obviously felt very strongly about it let's go on to the next section so Jesus in verse 14 and 15 calls the crowd to him and he says so this is everybody now listen to me everyone and understand this nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him rather it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean full stop so the crowd are thinking about this he was talking about clean and unclean and they were eating without washing their hands and now Jesus has said this thing to us just in a sort of like a riddle almost what does he mean what does he mean see they're puzzled about it nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him so that means that if you don't wash your hands it actually doesn't make you unclean maybe that's what he's saying and it's the things that come out of a man that make him unclean so what's

Jesus saying when you go to the toilet that's what makes you unclean is that what makes you unclean so should we not go to the toilet what is Jesus saying do you see if you look at the words there you might well ask what is Jesus talking about and the crowds don't necessarily understand it and his disciples certainly don't so in verse 17 when he left the crowd and entered the house this is typical fashion the disciples asked him about this parable it's a parable it's a form of speech and he says are you so stupid do you not understand what I was on about don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean why doesn't it make him unclean for it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach and then out of his body oh it does go out then what's the point that he's getting at what's the principle here the principle is not so much which direction it's travelling in but which part of you it's in contact with that's really what's at stake isn't it because there is a part of you that is really you that's where you think and where you decide things and where you obey

God where you don't obey God where you trust God where you don't trust God that part of you! your food doesn't touch that part of you it just touches your digestive system and it goes into your stomach and when it goes into the sewage system and it never touches your heart and Jesus saying that's the fundamental principle and incidentally in verse 19 in saying that Jesus declared all foods clean so it has huge implications for the gospel going on to other cultures you don't have to become a Jew to become a Christian you don't have to do all the Jewish ritual things that only touch your body or your stomach or whatever that's not where it's at so the things that go in only touch your digestive system and when

Jesus talks about coming out it's not so much the direction of travel but what it touches and he goes on to say this in verse 20 what comes out of a man is what makes him unclean Jesus isn't referring to going to the toilet he said well the things that come out that have come from within you that's what is out of the heart now what is the heart so it's important to understand this do you remember first officer Spock on the Starship Enterprise we will be landing momentarily captain wrong use of the word momentarily but anyway there are life forms here the thing about Mr Spock was that he had no emotions but he's very clever he could think things through and actually as the character developed you saw that he was really a very sacrificial person when you first see

[37 : 29] Mr Spock in his sort of emotionless as he seems to be you think he's hardly human but actually as the character develops he's very very human he didn't have much in the way of emotions does not mean he did not have a heart the heart in the Bible is not just the emotional bit we think head heart two different things the Bible doesn't do it like that the Bible says heart is the absolute centre of you where you feel things but you think things and you plan things and you evaluate things and you have your little schemes and you have your big schemes and you have your attractions to things and your compulsions towards things and things you avoid and fear all this goes on in the heart so it's the centre of the emotions it's not the centre of the person not just the

emotions but the intelligence the schemes the will and the values and he says the things that mesh into your heart those are the things that make you unclean what comes out of a man is making unclean from within out of men's hearts come these evil thoughts and then he gives the list doesn't he sexual immorality

I've got the list here just bear with me while I like so yes so these the reasonings the evil reasonings of the heart of within so there is sexual immorality and theft the little plans to take things that are not ours and murder and hatred that's all meshed in with the heart and adultery unfaithfulness in sexual matters that's there in the heart and greed which is can't read my own writing the idea is sort of having more not being satisfied not being content but wanting more

I'll be happy if only I could have such and such I'll be happy when I get so and so which you don't have at the moment you know the Bible says there's something wrong in that attitude evil what's translated as the next one lost my place malice so evilness badness and deceit craftiness deceit what's translated lewdness in the NIV which I think is not really a current English word what it actually says is shamelessness the inability to feel shame at forms of behaviour but just jumping into them without feeling shame and what's the next one envy and slander blasphemy arrogance the word means over shining to put yourself up and shine yourself out more than is right and proper and the last one is folly which means senselessness unreasoningness you know you insist on the course of action despite the fact that every reasonable argument says that's a stupid thing to do None of us would do that would we? that's what we're just following and all these things says Jesus come from inside and those are the things that defile it's taken a long time to get to that point hasn't it but this whole thing about what you eat and what sort of animals you have it was all meant to teach something it was meant to teach an idea but it wasn't the idea in itself let me give you an example when our kids learnt to play the violin with Mrs. Small they were taught first you pick up the bow like this then you pick up the violin like that then you put it under your chin like this then you put the bow like that and it was a sort of this is how you do it and what it was meant to teach was that you must get the violin right under your chin and you must hold the bow right at the end that's what it's meant to teach now have you ever seen a concert pianist or a concert violinist do this they have the principle because they tuck the violin under there and they hold the bow correctly but they don't need that childish framework and the Bible says that there were sort of child-rearing principles in the Old Testament which drop away as we come into the New Testament they are not the essence of the thing and clean and unclean food were sort of child-rearing principles the essence of the thing is these things this is what really makes people unclean this is what uncleanness really is and that was the list of things and my final question is okay, Jesus doesn't say there's no such thing as unclean he says that going to the market and failing to wash your hands doesn't make you unclean but there is such a thing as unclean and even more to the point if you're unclean how can you get clean?

he doesn't answer that in this passage does he? but if you are unclean how do you get clean? what washing will do that? and I can tell you that having a shower does not make you clean and having a bath does not make you clean what makes us clean is nothing but the blood of Jesus what can cleanse me from my sin?

[44 : 25] nothing but the blood of Jesus and in the Bible blood is the most polluting thing but it is also the most powerful cleansing thing the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanses us from all sin let's sing together let's sing together let's sing together let's sing together let's sing together let's sing together let's sing together let's sing together let's sing together let's sing together let's sing together