

## Clean Hands and Dirty Hearts

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 & Matthew 15:1-20  
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church  
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616  
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### Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup> God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew....<sup>29</sup> for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. <sup>30</sup> Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, <sup>31</sup> so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. <sup>32</sup> For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

### Matthew 15:1-20 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, <sup>2</sup> "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" <sup>3</sup> Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup> For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' <sup>5</sup> But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' <sup>6</sup> he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. <sup>7</sup> You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: <sup>8</sup> 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. <sup>9</sup> They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'"

<sup>10</sup> Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. <sup>11</sup> What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"

<sup>12</sup> Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" <sup>13</sup> He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. <sup>14</sup> Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

<sup>15</sup> Peter said, "Explain the parable to us." <sup>16</sup> "Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. <sup>17</sup> "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? <sup>18</sup> But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' <sup>19</sup> For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. <sup>20</sup> These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'"

## Clean Hands and Dirty Hearts

Someone once said that a pun is the lowest form of humor — but sometimes I can't resist. There once was a young man, a Puritan, somewhere around Boston in the 17th century, who had a great deal of

difficulty remembering the various rules of conduct in his community. He tried hard, but was constantly being ridiculed because of some breach of etiquette.

In desperation, he asked an older man, also a Puritan, to teach him proper manners. The task was formidable, and the older man's patience grew thin as he had to repeatedly chastise the younger man for his awkward ways.

Finally, on the way into the church one Sunday, the younger man started into the building ahead of the older man. He was then firmly collared by his elder, who then allowed a lady to go in ahead of both of them. The young man expressed his regret about walking in front of the older gent — and the lady.

The older gent still lost his temper. He screamed, "Canst thou remember nothing? How much easier can it become?" Pointing out the woman who had just entered, he said, "It is I before Thee, except after She!"

Pretty bad, I admit. But does anyone here, besides me, miss the day of good manners when it was "ladies first" or "age first?"

Does anybody here remember when good taste reigned in our society? Anybody? Do you remember when you could turn on the television when the kids were around without risk of embarrassment? When you could relax in a restaurant without being bombarded with four-letter words from the next table? When movies left something — anything — to the imagination. I'm sounding like an old prude. But most of you know what I am talking about.

Some of you will remember Al Capp, creator of the famous comic strip *Lil Abner*. Once Al Capp was invited to a university to give a lecture to the students. Before he could begin speaking to the large group assembled in the auditorium a very unkempt-looking student at the back shouted a vulgar word at him.

The word rang in everyone's ears. There was a shocked silence, but Capp, keeping his composure, said, "Now that you've given us your name, what's your question?" Let's come back to Al Capp's retort a little later. "Now that you've given us your name, what's your question?"

Jesus was in one of His familiar controversies with the Pharisees. The Pharisees had certain rules — not rules of hygiene, but religious rules — concerning the washing of hands. Jesus was trying to get them to change their focus to matters of greater importance.

In verses 10 and 11 of today's lesson from the gospel, Jesus called the crowd to Him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"

Jesus explains His meaning further in verses 19 and 20: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean (NIV).”

If I understand Jesus correctly, He is saying that what comes out of our mouths is a reflection of what is in our hearts. So when Al Capp said to the young man with the filthy mouth, “Now that you’ve given us your name, what’s your question?” he was speaking truth. The young man had stated who he really was on the inside by the quality of his speech.

It’s a thought worth remembering. We should each seek to be known for speaking truth, and not trash. As the star of Wayne’s World said to his co-star Garth when he used profanity, “You kiss your mother with that mouth.” Let’s think for a few moments about clean hands and dirty hearts.

**JESUS WASN’T KNOCKING CLEAN HANDS. HE WAS JUST CONCERNED ABOUT THE PHARISEES’ PRIORITIES.**

The Pharisees had become spiritual nitpickers, dealing with issues of minor consequence, while ignoring truly critical issues.

Donald Gray Barnhouse, a well-known British pastor writing some 75 years ago told of conducting a Bible Conference at Montrose, Pennsylvania for about 200 young people and a few older people. On one of those days two older ladies complained that some of the girls were not wearing stockings. These ladies wanted Dr. Barnhouse to rebuke these young people.

Barnhouse, looking these two women straight in the eyes, said, “The Virgin Mary never wore stockings.” The women gasped and said, “She didn’t?” Barnhouse answered, “In Mary’s time stockings were unknown. So far as we know they were first worn by prostitutes in Italy in the 15th-century when the Renaissance began. Later a lady of nobility scandalized the people by wearing stockings at a court ball, and before long everyone in the upper classes was wearing stockings, and by Queen Victoria’s time stockings had become the badge of the Victorian prude.”

Dr. Barnhouse says, “These ladies were...struck by the forcibleness of my argument.... They had no more to say. I did not rebuke the girls for not wearing the stockings, and a year or two afterward most of the girls in the United States were going without stockings in the summer and nobody thought anything about it. Nor do I believe that this led toward the disintegration of moral standards in the United States; times were changing and to step away from Victorian legalism was all for the better.”

It is amazing how hung up some people can become over relatively minor issues. For the legalist, of course, there are no minor issues. But, if that is so, that there are no minor issues, doesn’t it mean that there are no major ones either? But when that happens, if there are no major nor minor issues, then wearing long hair becomes the spiritual equivalent of murder. The length of a skirt becomes comparable to adultery.

Legalism continually strains at the gnat while swallowing the camel. Jesus undoubtedly appreciated many things about the Pharisees, but their sense of priorities here was out of whack.

Don't forget that Jesus was a practicing Jew. He kept many of the traditions of His people. Each Sabbath Jesus was in the synagogue. Even if He disagreed with the preacher, He was there. Even if Jesus, above all others, knew that His fellow worshippers were hypocrites, He was there. Even though there was nothing more Jesus could learn about God, He was there.

Jesus was a part of the fellowship of believers. He even said on one occasion that He had come to fulfill the law, not to destroy it. There was much about the Pharisees with which Jesus agreed. But He wouldn't countenance people who patted themselves on the back for keeping the intricacies of the law, while at the same time they were ignoring the hurts of people around them.

**EVEN MORE IMPORTANT, THE PHARISEES WERE BUILDING WALLS THAT EXCLUDED PEOPLE WHO NEEDED GOD'S HELP.**

Here is the tragedy of their misplaced priorities. While they were observing all the niceties of their understanding of "their religion," they were making some of their neighbors feel like dirt. Jesus came to build bridges between the people and God, and between people and people — not walls.

A writer named Josephine Deford Terrill tells an old story called, "The Golden Chain." It is about a college coed named Phyllis. During the first week of her sophomore year, Phyllis received an anonymous letter inviting her to join a secret sorority. The letter challenged Phyllis to do two things: memorize the sorority's "memory verse" and befriend ten freshman students before the week was out. The memory verse read: "I expect to pass through this life but once. If, therefore, there be any kindness I can show or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now and not defer or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again."

Over the next few weeks, Phyllis received more letters from the secret sorority. Each time, the letters reminded her to befriend more freshman students. One letter encouraged her to read the first six verses of Matthew 6, the basis for the sorority's charter. It also disclosed the sorority's motto: "Kindness is the golden chain by which society is held together."

Phyllis discovered that as she befriended new students, she gained in self-esteem. Finally, the day came for the meeting of the new secret sorority. Imagine Phyllis' surprise when she discovered every woman in the sophomore class was a member. One of their professors, concerned by the rates of loneliness and depression among freshman students, had conceived of the idea of a secret sorority of women who would become friends and mentors to the new students. This professor's experiment was a great success, and its influence stayed with these students long after they graduated from college.

Rather than being a unifying force in society, the Pharisees had become a divisive force. Rather than being inclusive by helping others find their way to God, they had become exclusive. Rather than

raising the self-esteem of the people around them, they made others feel unworthy, unclean. It was not so much that their hearts were dirty, but that they were cold and unfeeling.

#### WHAT THE PHARISEES DID NOT SEE WAS THAT GOD PREFERS BRIDGES TO WALLS.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. It is right that the Jewish people are very much indebted to the Pharisees. Much of what is best in Judaism would have been lost without them. Their insistence on keeping the traditions helped the Jewish people maintain their identity in a world filled with idolatry. The Pharisees did this by setting themselves apart. They were the righteous ones in a world going to hell in a handbasket, as the expression goes.

But in Jesus' time, they had gone too far. They built walls between themselves and others, walls that could not be mounted. Jesus wanted His disciples to build bridges rather than walls. To reach out to people, rather than exclude them.

This is still a delicate situation today. Well-meaning Christian parents confront this conundrum from time to time. They want to protect their off-spring from some of the pitfalls of the adolescent years. They know the kind of people that a young person runs around with oftentimes determines their behavior.

So, on the one hand they know that God doesn't mean for His people to wall themselves off from others; yet on the other, they want their young person to be around other young people who will influence them in a positive way, and to stay away from people who will bring them down. It is a delicate balancing act. In the same way the strictness of the Pharisees provided the Jewish people with a measure of protection from the idolatrous ways of their neighbors. The problem is that with their focus on legalism they had gone too far and were now majoring in the minors, so to speak.

The primary focus of Jesus' ministry was inclusiveness. He wants us to treat all people as worthy. Jesus gave His life for all. Storyteller Lee Pennington tells of a vital lesson he learned from an old woodcutter named Jim. Everyone in their small town knew Jim. He was the ugliest man in town. There were those who avoided Jim solely because of his appearance. But Lee considered Jim a friend. Jim had taken young Lee under his wing and taught him how to find and cut the best wood in the forest.

One day Jim challenged Lee to go out into the forest and find two leaves from different types of trees that were the exact same shade of green. "Gather as many leaves as you can," Jim said. "If you can find any two from different trees that are the exact same shade of green, then I'll pay you \$10.00."

Ten dollars was a fortune to a young boy back then, so Lee set about his task with vigor. He collected as many different leaves as he could find. But when he laid all the leaves before Jim, Lee realized that none of them were a perfect match. As he pondered the unique nature of each leaf, Lee understood that the same lesson could be applied to human beings too. At a young age, he learned to see the unique quality of every person he met.

This is Christ's will for us. Let's not major in minors. Jesus wants us to build bridges, not walls. All that really matters in life is our relationship with God, and our relationships with one another. So, let's reach out to the world for which Christ died and invite all whom we meet to come and walk alongside of us as we each seek to grow in our relationship with God.

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