

Spiritual Hygiene  
Mark 7:1 – 8, 14 – 15, 21 – 23; James 1:17 – 27  
Sunday, September 2, 2018

I want to start by asking a question to all the kids here. How many of you wash your hands before you eat? (Every time?) How many of your parents *tell* you to wash your hands before you eat? Why do they tell you to do that; why is it important to wash your hands before you eat food? Because your hands get dirt and germs on them throughout the day, and if you eat food with dirty, germy hands, some of those germs might get on your food and then get inside of you and make you sick. So washing your hands before you eat helps keep you healthy.

Now, if you *didn't* raise your hand, if you don't wash your hands before every meal, it's okay, you're in good company. Because apparently *Jesus* didn't wash *his* hands before eating, either. (Parents, you can thank me later for that.) We heard this story in Mark's gospel where some Pharisees (some of the Jewish religious leaders) noticed that Jesus' disciples were eating without washing their hands. And since a disciple does *everything* that his teacher does, then we know that *Jesus* wasn't washing *his* hands either. Because if *Jesus* had washed his hands, then his *disciples* would have, too. So, the Pharisees come to Jesus and say, "Why aren't your disciples following the tradition of the elders and washing their hands before they eat?"

Washing your hands before eating was not a part of Jewish law, the commandments that God gave to Moses and the people of Israel. What it *did* say in the commandments was that priests working in the temple had to wash their hands before entering the holy place or offering a sacrifice. So like if I was going to serve communion, I would have to wash my hands a certain way before I did that. The Pharisees believed that *all* the people of Israel were called to live as priests in the world, and because of that, they said *all* Jewish people should wash their hands a special way before they eat. That way, *every* meal they eat would be sacred and holy. This was

one of the Pharisees' traditions, and they believed that *everyone* should follow it. They weren't trying to be strict or mean. They were trying to help the people of Israel be holy and live right with God.

The Pharisees thought that this tradition helped them follow God's law. It was like a *fence* around the law that kept the law safe and helped preserve their way of life and faith. It helped them bear witness to the rest of the world about the goodness of God. It said, "These people are different. They are *holy*. Because their *God* is holy." So these traditions were very important to the Pharisees, because if you stopped following the *traditions*, then pretty soon you wouldn't be following the *law*, and you wouldn't be bearing faithful witness to the world around you. You wouldn't be showing them anything good or different or holy about *God*.

So just like washing our hands before we eat helps keep our bodies healthy, they believed that washing their hands before they eat helped keep them *spiritually* healthy. If you ate with unclean hands, then you're not taking God's law seriously, and that would make *you* unclean, your *spirit* unclean. Your relationship with God wouldn't be healthy. But if you ate with *clean* hands, then it would help keep your focus on God, so your relationship with God would be healthy, and your *spirit* would be healthy.

The Pharisees were worried that Jesus wasn't taking God's law seriously enough. That he wasn't keeping that fence around the law. But Jesus knew that what that fence was doing was not keeping the law safe. It was keeping *other people out*. What these traditions did was to emphasize that *some* people are *clean* and *some* people are *unclean*. "We do this because we belong to God, but the *rest* of the world, out there on the other side of the fence, they are unclean. They do *not* belong to God." So instead of these traditions drawing them *closer* to God

and to their neighbors (which is the whole point of the law in the first place – to love God and love your neighbor), it was actually *separating* them from God and from their neighbors by emphasizing the *difference* between them.

You see, the *problem* was that even though this wasn't one of the commandments that God gave them, the Pharisees *treated* it like it was. “You *have* to do this to be in a right relationship with God.” They took this human idea and treated it like it was from *God*. Instead of focusing *only* on God's law, they were focusing on this *other* stuff, too.

And Jesus *tells* them that. He says, “You're teaching *human* ideas like they're from *God*. It's like you're forgotten about what the law actually says, because you're so focused on these human traditions. There is nothing you can *do* that will make you clean or dirty inside. Purity and holiness comes from inside of you. If your heart and your spirit are pure and holy, the things you do will show it. If your heart and your spirit are *unclean*, the things you do will show *that*.” See, the Pharisees thought that if your *actions* were right, then your *heart* would be right. But Jesus says, “No, it *starts* with your *heart*. If your *heart* is right, then your *actions* will be right. So don't look *outside* to these *external* things. Look inside yourself. Examine your heart.”

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I want to ask another question to the kids. When you get up in the morning, and you're getting ready for school or church, how many of you look in the mirror? Before you leave the house, do you look at yourself in the mirror? Why do we do that? To make sure that we look the way that we want to look; we look presentable to the world. You make sure your hair is combed, your clothes look nice, you don't have dirt on your face. We want to make sure that when we go out and people *see* us, they don't say, “Whoa! What's going on *there*?”

When I look in a mirror, what am I looking at? Myself, right? My face, my hair, my clothes. Am I looking at *you*? Am I looking at *God*? Am I looking at my *heart*, my *spirit* – like what Jesus said, can I tell if my heart is pure by looking in a mirror? No. When I look in a mirror, I am looking at myself, my exterior, surface appearance.

James says in this letter that if you *hear* God's word but don't *do* what God's word tells you to do, then you are like someone who looks at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, when they walk away, they immediately forget what they look like. Who *does* that? Who looks at themselves in a mirror and then forgets what they look like? That's a strange thing for James to say. But we have to realize that he's not really talking about a *mirror* here.

James starts by saying that everything good comes from God. And it is *given* to us by God so that we might bear witness to the world of God's goodness. He says, "God gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." First fruits. When an apple tree produces its first apple of the year, you look at it and say, "Oh, *that's* what kind of tree this is. *That's* what the rest of these apples are going to look like." He is saying that God gave us every good gift so that other people would look at us and say, "Oh, *that's* what it looks like to live right with God and to bear God's fruit. *That's* what the Kingdom of God looks like." In a sense this is just what the Pharisees were saying; that we have to bear witness to the world around us of the goodness of God. We have to make sure that we are presentable to the world.

But then James picks up on what Jesus was saying. He says that righteousness begins *within*; that God has implanted a *word* on our hearts, and everything good stems from *that*. Everything good comes from the law that God has written on our hearts. He says that if you *hear* that word and don't do anything about it, you're like someone who looks at themselves in the mirror. He

*doesn't* say, "If you hear that word and don't do anything about it, you're like someone who looks at themselves in a mirror and forgets what they look like." There's an important distinction here that helps us understand this. James says that those who *hear* God's word and don't *do* it are like those who look at themselves in a mirror. Looks at *themselves* in a mirror. You're not looking at *God*. You're not looking at your *neighbor*. You're looking at *yourself*, focused on *yourself*. And you're not looking at your *heart*, your *spirit*. You're looking at the *exterior*. The *surface*. Looking in a mirror focuses on the *outside*, rather than the *heart* and the *spirit*, which is where God is at work.

The Pharisees were focused on the *outside*, the *external*, following these traditions and saying that holiness comes from *that*. They got "so focused on the externals of their faith that they forgot to examine their own hearts. Their efforts to live faithfully were putting up walls of alienation instead of drawing them closer to God and to their neighbors."<sup>1</sup> But Jesus and James are both saying, "Don't just look at yourself, at your own traditions or expectations or desires, because that keeps you from looking to God and your neighbor. If you just look to *yourself*, you're not going to find anything *lasting* there. You'll forget it as soon as you move on to the next thing. But if you look to *God*, if you examine your heart and look long and hard at God's word, God's law, what God wants for us, then you will be driven to *act*."

What will that action *look* like? James says, "Caring for orphans and widows in their distress, and keeping yourself unstained by the world." Loving God and loving your neighbor. Not putting up fences or walls that keep other people away. But letting God draw you closer to them. Loving and caring for those who cannot take care of themselves; those that nobody else cares

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3758](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3758)

about. If you look long and hard at the word that God has written on your heart, then you will act toward others out of a place of great love.

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Love for God is shown, not just in the performance of religious rituals and personal piety. It's not just about coming to worship and singing some songs and hearing a sermon and sharing communion. It's not just about your daily devotional. It's about what those things lead you to *do* – how they lead you to love your neighbor, how they lead you to speak and act toward others. Because if those things aren't drawing you closer to God and closer to others, then, like James says, they're worthless. But if through all of those things you hear the word that God has written on your heart, and you act in ways that bear witness to the goodness and love of God, then you will be the blessing of God.