

Introduction: We celebrated last week how even a glancing touch from the garments of our High Priest Jesus contained enough power to provide deep cleansing. This is the way we are to understand the cleansing of many sick ones at the end of Matthew 14, who were brought within the healing touch of the edge of Jesus' garments. This week, we see the issue of heart cleansing from the impurity of sin in the controversy which occurs between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 15:1-20. May the Lord work mightily in us as He gives us hope in His cleansing power for even the most deep-dyed of our sins.

**Monday: read Matthew 15:1-9.** During time periods of spiritual backsliding, such as we suffer today, when the "love of many has grown cold", we face the same spiritual problems which confronted Jesus in Matthew 15 – problems of empty ritual, coupled with hearts that don't match up to the faith they profess. As it was in the days of Jesus so it is in our day. The words of Isaiah sum up the universal condition of the human heart, as quoted by Matthew in Matthew 15:8-9:

*"These people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.  
They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are but rules taught by men."*

Meditate and Pray: *"Lord, we would ask you to do the heart surgery which our hypocritical lives so desperately need. Please search us and try us, and see if there be any wicked way in us. Lord, if you were to count our transgressions against us, then, O Lord, which one of us could stand? Indeed, Lord, we would confess with the Psalmist that we cannot discern our true heart condition! "Who can discern His errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep me also from willful sins; may they not rule over me..." (Psalm 19:12-13). Lord, we long to be innocent of great transgression. Thank you for giving us as our Savior 'a Lamb without spot', whose purity was, and always is, marked by utter sincerity of life, inwardly and outwardly. In His Name we pray for daily cleansing from the guilt, pollution and hypocrisy of sin. Amen."*

**Tuesday: read Matthew 15:1-2 and Mark 7:1-5.** In the Old Testament law, nearly everything used by the Israelite was to be cleansed by water and blood. This was especially true for the Priesthood, who led God's people in worship. They were to wash their hands and feet multiple times each day as an object lesson teaching the necessity of holiness when approaching the Lord.

In this way we learn that it was actually an important question which the Pharisees posed to Jesus: 'How does a person approach God in an acceptable and clean manner (versus disqualified and polluted)?' Guilt is real. Being barred from the presence of God because of the impurity of sin is a reality! Ritual cleansing, then was at least initially an effort to seek purity before God. This was a sincere effort on Israel's part to seek purity before God by adding washings to the daily life of the Israelite. The reasoning would go something like this: "If it is required that the *priest* should wash himself several times a day because *he* is holy to the Lord, then why not put that same rule in operation for *every* Israelite who takes holiness seriously? Sadly, as we will see tomorrow, the Pharisees addressed this concern for cleanliness in precisely the opposite way God had intended.

Meditate and Pray: Do we take God's holiness seriously? Tim Keller helps us to think on the matter of our uncleanness before a holy God in these words from his book (pg. 71), *King's Cross*: "If you're going to meet up with somebody who is particularly important to you – for that big date or important job interview – you wash, you brush your teeth, you comb your hair. What are you doing? Getting rid of the uncleanness, of course. You don't want a speck of stain on you. You don't want to smell bad. The cleanliness laws were the same idea. Spiritually, morally, unless you're clean, you can't be in the presence of a perfect and holy God".

Surely we need this reminder of how holy God is, using the words of hymn # 553:

*My sins, my sins, my Savior!  
They take such hold on me,  
I am not able to look up,  
Save only, Christ, on Thee;  
In Thee is all forgiveness,  
In Thee abundant grace,  
My shadow and my sunshine  
The brightness of Thy face.*

*My sins, my sins, my Savior!  
How sad on Thee they fall;  
Seen through Thy gentle patience,  
I tenfold feel them all;  
I know they are forgiven,  
But still, their pain to me  
Is all the grief and anguish  
They laid, my Lord, on Thee.*

*My sins, my sins, my Savior!  
Their guilt I never knew  
Till with Thee in the desert  
I near Thy passion drew;  
Till with Thee in the garden  
I heard Thy pleading prayer,  
And saw the sweat-drops bloody  
That told Thy sorrow there.*

*Therefore my songs, my Savior,  
E'en in this time of woe,  
Shall tell of all Thy goodness  
To suffering man below;  
Thy goodness and Thy favor,  
Whose presence from above  
Rejoice those hearts, my Savior,  
That live in Thee and love.*

**Wed/Thurs: read Matthew 15:1-14.** The actual controversy, (by which the Pharisees sought to find fault with Jesus' disciples because they did not observe ritual cleansings), need not detain us long. Suffice it to say that, yes, God enacted strict laws of cleanliness in the Old Testament, in the book of Leviticus. In this way, by teaching His people Israel to discriminate between 'clean' foods and 'unclean', or between ceremonial cleansing and the unclean condition of mankind in childbirth, sickness and death, God's goal was to drive His people Israel to an understanding of the uncleanness of their sinful estate in Adam. As they themselves learned in the ceremonial law to make everything they were to handle in this life clean through the sprinkling of water and the shedding of blood, so they were to be driven by such outward cleansings to see their *inward* need for deep spiritual cleansing through the blood of the Lamb. The legal necessity that *they* had to judge between clean and unclean was to remind them that *God* also judged the purity of their hearts. In the words of Psalm 24:3-4, only those with clean hands and a pure heart could approach the mountain of the Lord. The outward purity laws of the Old Testament ceremonial law were to teach the reality of this Psalm, ('ceremonial law' referring to the sacrificial and Levitical laws for Old Testament worship, as opposed to the moral law contained in the 10 commandments).

But the tragic mistake about this 'concern for cleanliness gone wrong' is that the Pharisees approached it in exactly the opposite way that God intended. They thought they could be acceptably pure before God by what Tim Keller calls, "Outside-In Cleansing". They thought by man-made rules and external observances that they could hide the actual sinful corruption of their hearts. In this way, they sought to "mask" their inward corruption under the guise of outward religiosity. (Note also that the basic idea behind the word 'hypocrite' in its origin in ancient Greek drama was to "wear a mask in order to act a part".)

Meditate and Pray: Notice in closing today how Jesus exposes this hypocrisy: by showing that, at the very same time that the Pharisees 'choked' on the disciples' small offense of failure to wash their hands before meals, they 'swallowed' the great evil of a son coming to the temple in order to 'pay-off' his obligation of caring for his parents through a special donation to the temple. The Pharisees had created this loop-hole to enrich their own pockets: "Just give us a donation for the temple coffers, and you can keep the rest that you would have used otherwise to care for your parents!" In this way, the Pharisees taught people to violate God's law of caring for parents, (the Fifth Commandment), by a special man-made donation to the temple! Do you see the hypocrisy of this? God save us! No wonder Jesus rejects these men as "blind guides" in Matthew 15:14!

**Friday: read Matthew 15:15-20.** Even Jesus' own disciples are "dull" and therefore slow to understand the radical lesson on heart-cleanness which Jesus' parable is designed to teach. So Jesus repeats it to Peter and the others in Matthew 15:17: "Whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and literally out of the body and into the latrine." (It never can pollute the heart of man because *it never touches the heart*, travelling only through the intestines!) "No", Jesus continues, "it is the evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander, which, coming to expression from the heart through the mouth... these eruptions from the heart are what make a man unclean".

Meditate and Pray: *Oh Lord, please help us to own our deeply stained hearts and to long for the purity which only comes from the blood of Christ. Hear our prayer as we sing in confession about our radical impurity in the words of hymn # 486:*

*God, be merciful to me,  
On Thy grace I rest my plea;  
Plenteous in compassion Thou,  
Blot out my transgressions now;  
Wash me, make me pure within,  
Cleanse, O cleanse me from my sin.*

*My transgressions I confess,  
Grief and guilt my soul oppress;  
I have sinned against Thy grace  
And provoked Thee to Thy face;  
I confess Thy judgment just,  
Speechless, I Thy mercy trust.*

*I am evil, born in sin;  
Thou desirest truth within.  
Thou alone my Savior art,  
Teach Thy wisdom to my heart;  
Make me pure, Thy grace bestow,  
Wash me whiter than the snow.*

*Broken, humbled to the dust  
By Thy wrath and judgment just,  
Let my contrite heart rejoice  
And in gladness hear Thy voice;  
From my sins O hide Thy face,  
Blot them out in boundless grace.*

*Gracious God, my heart renew,  
Make my spirit right and true;  
Cast me not away from Thee,  
Let Thy Spirit dwell in me;  
Thy salvation's joy impart,  
Steadfast make my willing heart.*

*Sinners then shall learn from me  
And return, O God, to Thee;  
Savior, all my guilt remove,  
And my tongue shall sing Thy love;  
Touch my silent lips, O Lord,  
And my mouth shall praise accord.*

**Sat/Sun: read Matthew 15:16-20.** Notice Jesus' use of the "heart" as the source of our inward pollution as sinners. Jesus' understanding of the heart, as in the rest of Scripture, is that the heart is the "control center" of the inner life. It is the seat of the will, the emotions and the intellect, as well as the place of moral responsibility. It is the place from which generosity and compassion, on the one hand, flow - as well as the place from which wickedness and cruelty find their origin. In short, the biblical idea of the "heart" is a much richer understanding than our contemporary culture which merely views the heart as the center of our feelings. "I'll follow my heart and not my head", we often hear said. But the heart is created by God to control all the mental processes of our lives – not merely the feelings. This is because God knows, once our hearts are persuaded to embrace the good, and find pleasure in that good which God calls good, then the mind's thoughts, the will's decisions, and the emotions' desires, will follow. As Robbie Burns put it:

The heart aye's the part aye  
That makes us right or wrang. <sup>70</sup>

*Meditate and Pray: "Lord, woe be to us! Sin has not merely taken hold of our emotions, or our baser desires! It resides not merely in our physical bodies and flesh. It has taken control of the center of our lives. The result is that, even as Christians, the Romans 7 reality is that the "good which we desire to do, and the goodly words and promises which we verbalize and commit ourselves to do... that we don't do. When we want to do good, evil is right there with us"! Wretched people of God that we are – who will deliver us from this body (and heart) of death?*

*Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ. For it is in Christ, Father, that you keep your promise of the New Covenant to "give us a new heart of flesh" in place of our hard-heart of stone with which we were born! Oh Lord, we ask you to take us, heart and soul, flesh and blood, and use us as you would desire us to be used! Take us, Father, take us, cleanse us by your Spirit from the inside out! We pray this in the name of the Lord Jesus, who took on Himself a real human heart and body in order to give us that heart transplant of grace unto newness of life, which we so desperately need. Amen".*