

Defiled or Deserted

Rev. David W. Edwards

March 23, 2025

Text: Matt 15:1-20

It was not a Valentines Day. A man went into the grocery store, to the floral section, and picked up a dozen red roses. Not a Valentines Day. Another man noticed what he was doing and asked, “A peace offering?”

When I was a child and did wrong, I knew that punishment was coming. But I tried to make things right by gathering up a handful of dandelions for my mom. My little offering did not stave off the well-deserved punishment. Plus, my mom quoted Scripture to me: *To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams* (1 Sam 15:22). That was Samuel’s response to King Saul’s offering. Saul had been commanded to annihilate the Amalekite army and to destroy everything – people, cattle, sheep, crops, everything. Saul kept the king alive and kept cattle and sheep. Saul’s disobedience resulted in his rejection as king, and Samuel’s stern instruction: *“Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king”* (1 Sam 15:22-23). Saul tried to apologize, but it was too late.

We have talked a lot in Sunday School about how the Jews, given the Law, seemed unable or unwilling to do as God instructed them – with dire consequences. In Hosea 6, we read the people saying, *“Come, let us return to the LORD ...”* and they appear to be repentant. But God responds to them, *“Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. ... For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings”* (Hos. 6:1-6). They wanted to offer sacrifices as an exchange for their disobedience. But God had enough of surface religiosity, as Isaiah announced, *“Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them”* (Is 1:14). And the shepherd prophet Amos declared, *“I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me”* (Am 5:21). God spoke through Jeremiah, *“Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me”* (Jer 6:20). In other words, God doesn’t want your ritual, your handful of dandelions. He wants your obedience. He wants you.

The Pharisees tried to please God with exaggerated obedience to the Law, turning the Law itself into a ritual. So long as we’re washing our hands before we eat and saying the right prayers at the right times, they were good. It reminds me of many Christians today who have an inverted concept of Christianity. They think that if they do the stuff, that makes them Christian. If they go to church once in awhile. If they drop a few dollars in the offering. If they don’t rob banks or cheat on their taxes (much), they think they’re good. We’ve got the cart before the horse. We think the

things we do and the things we don't do make us Christian, or make us holy. We're not converted. We're not even believers. We're actors. The reality is that none of that makes us Christian. Faith in Christ comes first. Behavior doesn't make us Christian. Conversion will result in certain behaviors. But exaggerated obedience to the letter of the Law is actually a rejection of the Law. Obedience for the sake of obedience is just ritual – sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice, and claiming righteousness on the basis of our sacrifice. Proper obedience flows from love for God. We do it because we want to please Him – not because we want to appease Him.

And so Jesus recognized their hyperspirituality in their criticism and responded from Isaiah, *“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain ...”* Their hearts aren't in it. They don't keep the law out of love for God. They don't even respect God. It's all for show. And their criticism is also a sham and a show of pride. “We do it but you don't, so we're better than you.” Or, of condemnation, “You're supposed to do it. Why don't you do it?” They have made an idol of the Law and have rejected the Law-giver.

Many Christians do the same thing with the Bible - and non-Christians, too, by the way. They make an idol of the Scripture. I see it when someone says, “Well, the Bible says ...” Or when they take a verse out of context to prove a point, either to justify their own behavior or to condemn someone else. “You shouldn't do that because the Bible says ...” “It's okay because it's in the Bible.” When they try to justify or excuse violating the law of God because they can find some one in the Bible who did what they are doing or want to do, they idolize the Bible and reject the One whose word it is. They have a religion of words and works, without heart and without power.

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!”

We have two issues with this question and then we'll get to Jesus' response. The first issue is their admission that this is a tradition. There is no law. The very closest we may get in the law is the demand that the priests wash as part of their preparation for their anointing and as part of the ceremonial cleansing prior to entering the Most Holy Place (Ex 30). Then there is the law of washing the whole body, including the hands, if one touches someone who has a discharge of a bodily fluid (Lev 15:11). But neither of those has anything to do with washing one's hands before eating. The second issue is the washing of hands itself. It's not like telling a child who's come in from playing in the mud to wash with soap and water before dinner. This is not even what we do when we come home from work and wash our hands. This was not a matter of cleanliness, but a matter of ceremony. And if you've been with us for a Passover observance, you will recall that the ceremonial hand-washing was basically just wetting the hands and drying them. It was simply a ritual. It was ceremonial cleansing, not actual cleansing.

Jesus tackles the first issue head on: the issue of tradition. *“And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?”* The fifth commandment is *Honor your father and mother* (Ex 20:12). Jesus also quoted Leviticus 20:9, *Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.* Why do those go together? Because it was the eldest son's responsibility to care for his parents in their old age. That's why he received a double portion of the inheritance. To not provide that care was to curse them with poverty, to deprive them of proper food and clothing, or to

reduce them to begging to survive. A son who did not provide for his parents was considered to have cursed them, and dishonored them, serious violations of the law.

But the Pharisees had so interpreted the law to mean that one could dedicate his inheritance to God. Something that was “devoted” became holy and could not be used for mundane purposes. So they had adopted an exception from the requirement to care for elderly parents. If one had no resources, he would not be in a position to care for his parents. So to escape the requirement to care for his parents in old age, one was allowed to “devote” that portion of his inheritance. They had created a way to dishonor and curse their parents while maintaining their “righteousness”. I’m sorry Mom. I’m sorry Dad. But I just can’t afford to take care of you now that you can’t take care of yourself. The money that would have provided for you has been dedicated to God. You’ll just have to beg in the streets to eat. The pretense of keeping the law while blatantly violating it made them hypocrites - *they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*

Then Jesus dealt with the whole hand-washing issue. Let me note, first of all, that the reason we wash our hands before we eat is a wholly different matter. We wash off dirt and grime that might contaminate our food and make us sick. We gather bacteria on our hands through the work that we do, and if you’re a gardener or if you keep animals, you know that it is a very good idea to wash your hands before you eat. Dirty hands can make you sick. But that’s not what the Pharisees were concerned about. Hand-washing was not a matter of health, but a spiritual issue. The Greek word means “to make common or impure, to defile,” as the opposite, perhaps, of to make holy. The custom probably began during the Babylonian exile, as a way of maintaining ritual purity in a foreign land. When they were forced by their circumstances to deal with people and things they considered unclean, they would wash as a way of separating themselves from the impurity of their surroundings. It is a religious sense, not a physical sense. We wash our hands for health reasons. That’s different.

“Listen and understand,” Jesus said, “*What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them ...*” Let’s stop there, for a moment. There was the concern of early Jewish Christians regarding gentiles eating kosher. God dealt with Peter on that matter in Acts 10, and the Jerusalem Council decreed, *You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality* (Acts 15:29). Paul will deal later with the issue of eating meat that had been offered to idols. There was a concern in the early Church that eating meat offered to idols was a matter of worshiping those idols, and that there was some sort of spiritual contamination that resulted. Paul responded that the idols had no power, were not really gods, and if a person wanted to eat such meat, that was a personal matter for their own conscience (1 Cor. 8). Again, these are matters of the spirit, not of the body.

Jesus reminds them of the way the human body functions. You eat. Food is digested. Waste is excreted. “*Whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body.*” There is no religious or spiritual significance whatever to the process. It’s the way we were made. What you eat may affect your emotions and your physical health. You may have to watch what you eat for those reasons. But physical processes are the way God designed them to be. Eat what you

The real problem is what comes out of the mouth. What goes in has no spiritual significance, but what comes out - that is what matters. You see, the mouth betrays the heart. I have said many times that your belief informs your behavior. You act out of what you believe. What we fill our

minds with is what comes out of our mouths. We speak about what we know, and our speech tells others what kind of person we really are.

“The things that come out of persons mouth,” Jesus said, *“come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.”* These are things, by the way, that Jesus dealt with in the Sermon on the Mount, back in chapters 5-7. Adultery begins with lust; murder begins with anger; theft begins with covetousness. The heart is the repository of evil.

What that means for is that it is far more important for us to deal with the inner man, with our moral nature, than it is to worry about the physical man. It’s far more crucial to control what we read, see, and hear, than what we eat. Don’t get me wrong here. The physical being is important. What you eat matters. Remember that gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins. And the Scriptures tell us, *Honor God with your bodies* (1 Cor 6:20). Your physical habits do matter. Take care of your physical being. But don’t neglect your inner being.

One of the memory verses Jo wanted us to learn was Proverbs 4:23 - *Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.* Guard your heart against evil thoughts. I recall as a teenager that we often used the excuse that you can’t help what you think. I still hear it occasionally, but I’ve discovered that it isn’t true – you can control what you think about. It’s all about input – what you put in – garbage in, garbage out. Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things* (Phil 4:7-8). Fill your minds with good, beauty, and nobility. He told the Corinthian church, *we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ* (2 Cor 10:5). We can control our thought life by controlling what we use for entertainment.

We are called to be holy people. That is much more than just keeping a set of rules. It begins with the inner being, the moral life. If we are going to properly represent Christ to the world, it has to begin inside, with a cleansing work of grace. What we are is not how we wash our hands, but what we are inside. God calls us to be holy in character, in our essential being. Guard your heart.