

Matthew 15:1-20: Torah Conflict: Clean & Unclean

Introduction:

God's People! We're continuing to walk through Matthew together, and today's passage is a challenge to us--to our justifications, our hypocrisy, our faithfulness. Before we talk about it, let's pray together.

Prayer:

Remember the Pharisees:

Let's remember that not simply the Pharisees, but basically every Israelite Jesus interacts with viewed the world as an us and them place. There were Israelites, God's Chosen People, and everyone else. God had set it up that way: had called Abraham, nurtured his descendants, given them special promises and made commitments to see those promises through.

Israel was supposed to be Holy, that is, set apart, set apart for God's purposes. Those purposes included blessing the world and teaching the world about God, but that call to service got lost over time. And all sorts of things were reminders of this: their dietary restrictions, their behavior restrictions. Most of the weird stuff we read about in Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy were rules for living that made sure in

every single area of life that Israel remembered they were set apart, and different from those who weren't God's People. They got the blessings, but forgot their responsibility.

A Maintenance Way of Life:

They were to make sure that they were ready for God's work, and that making sure often looked like, basically, making sure that they were ready for God's work. Maintenance became a way of life, separateness become a way of life, and what was being maintained was largely this holiness, this readiness, this set-apartness.

It's a stagnating thing, full of disease and pests, when your faith practices exist only so that you can do your faith practices.

Clean & Unclean:

So the world was divided into "clean," allowable things to do and things to eat and ways to live, and "unclean" things to do and things to eat and ways to live. Clean was good, allowable; unclean was bad, off-limits, and darn it all if just about everything you could do could make you unclean somehow. Clean and unclean have nothing to do with dirt. When Jesus talks about "being defiled" in today's passage, he's talking about becoming religiously unclean.

But a lot of stuff was more than just "off limits" more

than just "not allowed." Somehow it was able to transfer that "off limits, bad news" quality to whatever it touched. And then whatever that touched, became off-limits, too, for awhile unclean and contagious itself.

The Pharisees and their way of life started out as a populist religious movement, a sort of "faith of the people" thing. They developed traditions, taught in certain ways, had ceremonies and habits that ensured that people could live up to God's standards for them. They could maintain the maintenance. But man: the fences they built to keep people falling off cliffs of sin became cages for those people. You could barely turn around without becoming unclean by the Pharisees' standards.

We've already seen Jesus take on the deepest symbol of these faithfulness requirements, these Torah standards, when he claimed unique rights over the sabbath. Now he does it over the cleanliness and uncleanliness rules. And it makes the Pharisees so mad!

The Jerusalem Contingent:

Let's walk through what happens.

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, 2 "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before

they eat!”

The Pharisees and teachers of the law, they come from Jerusalem to ask Jesus this question about why his followers don't do what--what tradition, commonsense, culture, even Scripture, as they read it--why they don't do what they think every good Israelite ought to do.

And man, Jesus just lays them out. It's amazing.

3 Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’[a] and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’[b] 5 But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’ 6 they are not to ‘honor their father or mother’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. 7 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

8 ““These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’[c]”

10 Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. 11 What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but

what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.”

Public Shaming: Scripture

Jesus points out the way the Pharisees' and Law-Teachers own traditions allow them to do exactly what Scripture--the Ten Commandments--says they shouldn't do! Jesus doesn't resort to tricks, here, when he puts this Jerusalem Contingent in their place. He simply quotes to them the word, the commands, of God.

“...you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition,” Jesus says. Their tradition, which they felt protected the word of God, is undoing it. Enables them to reject it.

Jesus calls them hypocrites after this. And they are: They believe their traditions make it so that people can follow God the way people are supposed to, but instead their traditions cancel out “the word of God.”

Their traditions, we could call them the words of men, cancel out the word of God, what God explicitly asked of His People: That they treat their elders well.

Public Shaming: Isaiah Quote

And Jesus, in quoting Isaiah at them, is saying that the prophecy he quotes is about them. Any faithful Pharisee or Teacher of the Law, would know how Isaiah 29

continues after Jesus' quote. Right after he ends, Isaiah continues this way:

14 Therefore once more I will astound these people

with wonder upon wonder;

the wisdom of the wise will perish,

the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”

15 Woe to those who go to great depths

to hide their plans from the Lord,

who do their work in darkness and think,

“Who sees us? Who will know?”

16 You turn things upside down,

as if the potter were thought to be like the

clay!

Shall what is formed say to the one who formed

it, “You did not make me”? Can the pot say to

the potter, “You know nothing”?

Jesus is telling these religious elites, as they stand around him in condemnation, that they think they are better than God. They are turning things upside down, deciding what worship should be like. But all they have are “merely human rules.”

The Needy Will Rejoice:

And if we kept reading in Isaiah 29, we'd see that this prophecy of Isaiah, it's supposed to be locked up, not understandable until some future day when God brings about Justice, and “the needy will rejoice in the

Holy One of Israel,” and “those who...with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice [will be cut down].”

Jesus is saying that “future day” is now. He’s opening up the eyes of people to understand Isaiah. Those who twist the law, like this Jerusalem Contingent, are on their way out. His very presence demands it.

Offending the Useless:

After he tells the people to understand him, Jesus says “What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that’s what defiles them.”

For people who for generations have believed the opposite, this is more than radical, or extreme, or something. This isn’t even understandable. It’s nonsense. It goes against what the crowd--and their grandparents, and their grandparent’s grandparents’, and their parents, too--have internalized as true, as the right way to live and worship God. They’ve been taught it every day for decades.

The disciples come up to him and point out that he offended the Pharisees, which is basically the best understatement around.

I mean, he pointed out that their protected traditions allowed them to disobey one of the ten

commandments, the most important “rules” God gave His People in order to keep them set apart from the nations around them. Jesus did all this in public, and on top of it, said that God, in Isaiah, was talking about them when God condemned those who literally give “lip-service” instead of “service-service” to God.

Jesus responds to this obvious statement with a pretty stark assessment of these faithfulness-police. They are blind guides who lead themselves and those they guide into pits. They’re weeds who live to be uprooted. He just says, “Leave them.” Ignore them.

Dullards:

And faithful Peter, who always fills silence, asks for an explanation. Jesus responds:

16 “Are you still so dull?”

This sounds harsh, but it’s kinda reasonable? They’ve been following Jesus for months by now. Beyond that, Jesus just quoted Isaiah’s passage to them, which points out that the teachings of the Pharisees and Scribes are “merely human rules,” that these guys honor God “with their lips” but not with their hearts, *which is what matters*.

He’s said that “What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them.” This is straightforward, if not worldview-destroying. The only riddle, maybe, in what

Jesus has said is the second clause of the sentence, “but what comes out of their mouth, that’s what defiles them.”

Even then, Jesus can be talking about two things, really: physical stuff--vomit, spit, a tooth now and then--or words, really: curses and blessings, grumbling and praise, slander or honor.

If he’s just pointed out how importantly God wants the heart of his people, not “human rules,” then you’d hope, after months soaking in Jesus’ way of thinking, his disciples would connect the dots between what Jesus quotes and what he teaches: that a person’s words, which reveal their heart, is what matters.

But they don’t. He has to explain what he says.

Out Of The Heart...

Jesus says this:

17 “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? 18 But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. 20 These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed

hands does not defile them.”

Food goes in and poo comes out, right? The miracle of the digestive system. Poo, by the way, wasn't unclean; maybe it was too human, too much a part of life, for God's People to distance themselves from it. But poo wasn't unclean; there's a metaphor there.

But what we see in Jesus' response is that he undoes basically the entire system of worship, of holiness maintenance, of self-identification and others-distancing that the Pharisees and those who follow them swear by. He undoes their way of life, doubling down on the way he claimed rights over their sabbath-keeping rules just a few chapters ago. He says, in essence, that what is considered unclean "in the world" doesn't have the power to transfer its uncleanliness to people.

No Longer Contagious:

The "uncleanliness" disease that so many things are infected with, especially Gentiles...it's no longer contagious. In fact, Jesus goes one step further. He shuts down the whole perspective that there are things that exist in the world that have some "unclean" quality. Things are no longer unclean in and of themselves.

Jesus takes the negative unclean contagion right out of stuff. It's no longer contagious; it just is. This is what

Paul is getting at when he says, "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." Now, certain Christians throughout the centuries have latched on to this and reveled in a lot of nasty, bad stuff cause, "Hey, it's neutral, what's the big deal?" They're delusional; tour guides in pit country.

Because Jesus raises the bar, frankly. He goes one step beyond saying you can't "catch" uncleanness by what goes in you; instead, he says that we are all carriers of the disease. Uncleanness isn't out there, waiting to get us; it's in here, and we're already got.

Uncleanliness...is a human quality.

Being unclean now has to do with one's character, not with one's consumption. It has to do with one's character, not one's consumption. Uncleanness isn't a quality out there; it's a human quality. It's part of us.

And our hearts give rise to all sorts of evil thoughts. And the specific thoughts that Jesus lists, which we so often turn into actions? They're ones that echo the Ten Commandments, that list of basic behaviors that God's People were supposed to live by. It's the same list that has in it "honor your father and mother," which the Pharisees found a way to throw out.

Jesus returns his disciples, and any of the crowd who

were still around, to his ongoing standard, which is Scripture. And Scripture always has a way of revealing the shallowness of human tradition.

The Best Use:

To make the best use of this parable, I think, we have to first remember that Jesus was condemning the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law for the ways their traditions had canceled out God's commands.

So the best use of this passage is simply to ask ourselves in what ways our traditions nullify--cancel out--the commands of God? In what ways do our traditions excuse us from acting like Jesus?

I could ask this in other ways: what standards do we have for following Christ that frankly just aren't in the Bible? What do we believe "good Christians" should do? What do we believe "good Christians" should do? Are those things commanded by Christ? Are they affirmed by the early Church? Are they biblical at all?

And we're quick to say "I know some Christians who..." or "I was a part of a church once that..." or "God, I thank you that I am not like other people--robbers, evildoers, adulterers --or even like tax collectors. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

I don't care about other Christians or other churches, not in any practical, invested way. But I do care about

us and our congregation. So in what ways do we as individuals and we as a congregation replace the Bible with our standards, traditions, or expectations?

How are we getting around Scripture, and what Jesus asks of those who follow him?

Clean & Unclean:

And we don't have to fear becoming "unclean" out in the world.

If we've been around Smoky Row for any length of time, we've gnawed this bone, I think. We know that we're supposed to have our character shaped into one like Jesus' own; that this is our responsibility, our promise, our inheritance and our calling. We're to become like Christ utterly by the Spirit's power.

We've been taught, as Paul puts it, "to be made new in the attitude of our minds; to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." Our minds are being renewed, and our lives transformed, so we can "test and approve what God's good, pleasing, and perfect will is." And as we live together, and turn to Scripture to discover how Jesus and the early Church made sense of the world, our hearts simply change. Our minds simply change. They just change, over time. We become holy and set apart for every good work; we are cleansed, and take our cleanliness wherever we go the same way Jesus did

wherever he went.

We live unafraid of being around spiritually or morally messed up people--prostitutes and johns and pimps, liars and cheats and the proud and lazy and resentful and occasionally faithless--just like Jesus wasn't afraid of being around anyone, because he knew that he couldn't catch their uncleanness. Like him, the Spirit reveals to us the truth of Scripture, the source of our standards, and like him, we freely serve the weak, the oppressed, and bear the sufferings of others so they don't have to. And we don't fear spiritual contagion. When we're at our best, we don't fear anything.

It's the First Sunday of Advent, one of the oldest traditions the Church has practiced. It's a time when we are meant to consider the disruption Jesus' first arrival caused, and challenged to live in such a way that when Jesus returns, our character, habits, practices are not disrupted much at all, because we've been embodying faithfulness. And today we're called to consider hope. And I want to offer this, then, in light of this passage.

To offer hope is to become hopeful. If you are not hopeful, the quickest way to become so is to offer hope to others--to present the future as a place where the goodness of God is easily seen in their lives and the lives of those they love. The Jerusalem Contingent had no hope; they had only maintenance. They had lost

their God-given mission to bless the world, and pinched between the political worries of Rome on the one side, and a fear of catching sin on the other, they had forgotten God. Forgetting God, they lost the empowering trust that gives people the freedom to bless those who need hope. We have been made for that freedom, shaped by the Spirit for it.

But I could ask myself and each of us, “Who do we think is unclean, and why? Who do we think is unclean, and why? When Jesus was near people who were considered “unclean,” how did he act toward them?” What people shouldn’t “good” Christians be around, and why? Because those people are so often the ones to whom we need to offer hope, and in offering hope, be driven toward it ourselves. Jesus will be all in all, even if he isn't yet.

Conclusion:

There are other lessons that we can take from this passage. When we lean away from the Spirit, from Scripture, from others who care about these things, “evil thoughts” can bubble up in our minds. We do need to take Paul’s advice when he says “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.” We could talk about lip-service, and how useless it is compared to, you know, service-service.

The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were out to get Jesus. They weren't politely curious about his nifty, novel way of obeying God. They didn't have the Holy Spirit alive in them and their friends.

We are so much better positioned to grow in trust, obedience, and love when we ask questions of ourselves and God than these guys were. I hope we can take advantage of our advantages. We don't need to become "holier than thou" in our efforts to live more holy than we are now. But Christ's standards for us are very high; his faithfulness to us even higher.

What people shouldn't "good" Christians be around, and why? What things should "good" Christians do, and why? Where do our standards for these things come from?