

Sermon-Matthew 15:10-20

August 15/16, 2026

In Matthew's gospels the past few weeks we have been following Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem. He is not just covering miles as he travels, but He is shaping the hearts and minds of people to care for each other and to love each other, through His actions and through the proof he offers that He is of the Kingdom of God.

We have heard of Jesus walking on water, calming the storm, and feeding thousands of people. He has presented us with parables to give us examples of the change in thinking that will lead us to a life of Grace and the acceptance that there is a Kingdom beyond the kingdoms and countries in our world.

But in Matthew's gospel today, there is a high-stakes confrontation between Jesus and the existing religious hierarchy. The Pharisees are critical of Jesus for allowing his disciples to violate the tradition of washing hands before they eat.

Let's take a moment to recall who exactly are the pharisees. The pharisees were part of an influential Jewish movement and religious sect in Judea. Jesus accused the Pharisees of focusing on outward religious performance and minor rules while ignoring the core values like justice, mercy, and love for God. The Pharisees opposed Jesus because He openly challenged their religious authority, rejected their strict oral traditions, and exposed their hypocrisy. As the crowds flocked to His teachings and the miracles He performed the Pharisees feared losing their social standing, their religious control and political stability under Roman rule.

The issue of washing hands, then is a good example. For us, today, washing hands is a hygiene issue. Keeping our hands clean keeps us safe from disease and illness....for us in our post-COVID world this is a well-accepted practice based on our health and well-being. For the Pharisees, the washing of hands was about adherence to human rules and regulations that are masquerading as religious issues. It was about a series of behaviors that were demanded of people to prove outwardly that they are not "unclean" and that they are following the dictates of God.

The Pharisees orchestrate attention and they work to maintain a sense of order by their man-made laws and rules....they classify people, practices, and behaviors-they monitor the behavior of others and classify them as "clean" and "unclean." I cannot find where it says that you need to wash your hands so that you are acceptable to God, but in that time, none of us would want to be called "unclean." By declaring someone unclean, they can be discredited and left as a separate group and not practicing like the rest of us who dutifully

adhere to the traditions and teachings. It can be a technique to exclude people from the mainstream. However, it has nothing to do about what is in our hearts and our own relationship with God.

Jesus directly confronts the Pharisees by calling the people to Him and says, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person." Clearly this is not a lesson in the digestive system, but a lesson that what comes out of our mouths is a mirror into our hearts. "For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

By confronting the Pharisees and showing the fallacy in their thinking, Jesus is crossing a boundary.....for the Pharisees have both social and political power. Jesus is replacing the view that we categorize people by what is wrong with them and is replacing it with acceptance and extending an embrace to all people.

Even today, we sometimes have a temptation to measure faith by outside factors.....like attendance, language, reputation, habits, appearance, and routine. All those traits or behaviors have value, but they cannot cleanse the soul. A person can know and even practice religious customs and still be far from God. Jesus is asking us to listen to what is beneath the surface, and examine what is happening within, he cautions that the Pharisees are blind guides, and when the blind lead the blind, they both will fall into a pit.

We are often inclined to look at the external features of a person or object and then determine if or how that person or object is acceptable or not. In simple terms it is the saying that, "you cannot judge a book by its cover." Yet we do...

Drive down any street and look at the houses. Most likely you will find a difference in the style, color.....how well the house is maintained.....is there a lovely garden, or unkept weeds....are there toys strewn all over the yard? There are many variables when we look at a house, and we can discern something about the owners like how well they take care of it for example. But what we cannot know is what is the inside of that house like....is there happiness or unhappiness, love or strife, is there illness, disharmony, addiction, abuse, or grief. We cannot tell what is happening in each of the homes we pass. But there are people who would make judgements based on the outside of the house. We make judgements about a neighborhood based on who lives there and what the house looks like.

There are those who would make judgments about people based on how they look, or where they are from, or the way they worship....

are we making judgements about people-too many piercings, too many tattoos, unusual manner of dress, they talk with a foreign accent, they are a different race, they are LGBTQ, they are poor or unkept. Can we tell what is in their hearts and are we being as welcoming as Jesus has taught us or are we using our knowledge and biases to find ways and reasons to exclude people or groups of people. Are we declaring people unclean because of our biases. Too often those biases turn into how we treat others.

Who are we declaring to be unclean? Who does our community declare to be unclean? Are there people who would upset you if they moved next door or attended church here.

The point of the gospel is that regarding people, Jesus and his love and mercy change our way of seeing and dealing with people; people who are different, people who have disease, disability, and dysfunction. People who look differently, people who have a different sexual orientation, people who believe differently.....the list can be long but regardless the length of the list.....Love and mercy come first.....Amen.