

This Sunday, in the final week of our Jesus series, we came to a really interesting story in Matthew 15:1-20. In this story, a group Pharisees travelled all the way from Jerusalem to the north shores of Lake Galilee, (about 110 km), to investigate Jesus.

They wanted to know why Jesus and his disciples didn't follow their customs: *"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"* Matthew 15:2.

While it's good to wash your hands before you eat from a hygiene perspective, the washing in this context refers to a ceremonial washing. The Old Testament contained various laws about ritual cleansing specifically for priests before they performed certain duties, but not other than that. But a whole man-made tradition had evolved that said you had to wash your hands in a certain way, every time before you ate. This was about ritual and ceremony, not hygiene. Jesus' disciples were not following these rituals, so the Pharisees wanted to know why not.

Instead of answering their question or giving them an explanation, Jesus gave the religious leaders a counter-charge, asking the Pharisees and teachers of the law why they broke the command of God for the sake of their tradition: *"And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' they are not to 'honour their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.'" Matthew 15:3-9.* They were nullifying God's Word for the sake of their tradition, and Jesus called them hypocrites quoting scripture from Isaiah saying that they honoured God with their lips, but their hearts were far from God.

Peter asks Jesus: *"Explain the parable to us."* Matthew 15:15. This seemed like a great question to which Jesus responds: *"Are you still so dull?"* Matthew 15:16. Wow!

But, Jesus, being their Teacher, explained the parable to them: *"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?" "But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them."* Matthew 15:17-18. Food goes in through the mouth and passes through the body, but it is out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. But it's the thoughts in the heart that come out the mouth. So what kinds of things come out of it? *"For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."* Matthew 15:19.

Three things that stand out about this story:

### 1. This story is about WORDS vs HEART

These Pharisees and teachers of the law had travelled a long way to ask Jesus this trick question about hand washing. Jesus response, *"These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."* Matthew 15:8 is a quote from Isaiah 29:13 (700 years earlier). The same verse is still challenging for us today. God is looking for more than lip service from us.

### 2. It is a story about SIN

The same story is told in Mark, however in Mark 7:20-23 Jesus expands on what stems from the human heart: *He went on: 'What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.'*

Jesus is saying to them: You need a washing of the heart, more than a washing of the hands!

### 3. It is a story that points us to JESUS!

There is only one thing in the world that can remove the stain of sin from our hearts: The blood of Christ. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ ... cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! Hebrews 9:14.

When we put our faith in Him, then He begins to transform us... The things that stain:

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|----------------------|--------------|
| 1. Sexual immorality | PURITY       |
| 2. Theft             | INTEGRITY    |
| 3. Murder (anger)    | SELF-CONTROL |
| 4. Adultery (lust)   | FAITHFULNESS |
| 5. Greed             | GENEROSITY   |
| 6. Malice            | KINDNESS     |
| 7. Deceit            | HONESTY      |
| 8. Lewdness          | RESPECTFUL   |
| 9. Envy              | CELEBRATE    |
| 10. Slander          | ENCOURAGE    |
| 11. Arrogance        | HUMILITY     |
| 12. Folly            | WISDOM       |

### So how do we apply this to our lives?

#### 1. Acknowledge our sin.

We need to grieve the state of our heart. *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.* Psalm 51:1-2

#### 2. Repent of our sin

Changing our minds and agreeing with God.

#### 3. Accept His cleansing

*To make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.* Ephesians 5:26.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Icebreaker (Choose 1)

- Do you have family traditions that have carried through generations? What are they?
- Does our church have traditions in which you like to participate? Do these traditions provide comfort to you or others? If so, why?

## Questions For Groups (Choose 2 or 3 questions)

1. What was your number one takeaway from Sunday's message?
2. Read Psalm 51. What do you think David felt when he wrote this Psalm?
  - a). How does sin affect us when we come before God?
  - b). How does sin affect how God sees us?
  - c). How does it affect relationships with God and others around us?
3. Read 1 John 1:8-10. Think about what it takes to keep your heart pure. Share your thoughts with the group.
4. Of the list of the 12 things that stain our heart (see notes below), which do you struggle most with? It takes courage to share some of these things. Read James 5:16 to see how much it helps us to share with others.
5. Part of applying Sunday's message to our lives is to accept God's cleansing through the washing of the word: *To make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.* Ephesians 5:26. What is your current Bible reading habit? What can you do to strive to keep your heart clean through a daily washing with the word?

# PRAYER POINT

Pray for our country during this election week. (Don't get into a political discussion!)

# ACTION POINT

*'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me'* Matthew 15:8.

Is your heart near or far from God? Consider the questions below; ask the Lord to speak to you. Remember, He is a loving Father who disciplines us because He loves us. He does not condemn. He works to save and transform us.

- Do you long for God above all else, or has someone or something taken His place? It may be a relationship, a career, a hobby, a dream, possessions, illness or anxiety.
- Do you obey God no matter what? Or have you strayed into picking and choosing which of his commands you feel like obeying?

If God is challenging you about something, acknowledge it and ask for His forgiveness.