WHAT DEFILES A PERSON

Matthew 14:34–15:20

Key Verses: 15:10,11

“Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen and understand. What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.’”

Who wants to make themselves sick? Probably very few people, right? We try to be careful about what we eat and drink and our personal hygiene and cleanliness, so that we can at least stay healthy. But sometimes, even the people with the best diet and exercise still get sick and die. It comes back to the great old question, “Is it *nature*, or is it *nurture*?” In other words, sickness can come from our environment, but often it’s a genetic thing. In today’s passage Jesus is saying the core of all our problems are actually within ourselves. He’s talking about a health condition that’s not physical, but spiritual. To be healthy spiritually, God isn’t so concerned about what we’re doing outwardly, but about what’s going on in our hearts. He doesn’t want us to be hypocrites, but genuine. He wants us to focus on what’s going on in the place where no one but he can see. May God help us really listen to Jesus today.

Today’s story begins with Jesus’ ministry to sick people. Look at 14:34–36. As we’ve seen in our studies, Matthew’s Gospel emphasizes Jesus’ healing ministry, and it’s often a metaphor for his spiritual healing. Wherever Jesus went, people raced to bring their sick to him. Why? It was so obvious to people: Jesus not only had power to heal, but also he cared. Jesus cared about sick people, the ones most others overlooked or thought were disposable. Most people love healthy, good-looking people, but Jesus loved the sick. Jesus cared so much for them that he would never turn them away; he would minister to them all throughout the day, and sometimes, even late into the night. In verse 36 Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ power to heal. He had so much healing power in him, people thought, that it was oozing out even from his clothing. They probably heard about the woman earlier who got healed of her chronic problem by just touching the edge of his cloak (9:20,21). Here, many who touched him in faith were healed (36b). It tells us that no matter how sick we may be, physically or spiritually, we can come to Jesus and know he has power to heal us, and that he truly cares. All we need do is reach out to him in faith and touch him.

Then, a very different group of people come to Jesus. Look at 15:1,2. Their question seems rather silly, especially when Jesus was bringing such powerful healings into people’s lives. But they were dead serious. The Pharisees had been questioning and criticizing Jesus’ ministry all along, but this time, they were from Jerusalem—about 100 miles away. Being from Jerusalem, they were the top religious leaders of the country. We wonder why these men traveled this long distance to ask such a question. Obviously they felt threatened by Jesus’ growing and popular ministry. Jesus wasn’t doing things *their* way. Jesus was sharing God’s word with people, but he was also mingling with all kinds of people they considered unclean. Jesus wasn’t strict or legalistic like them, but free and gracious. They thought Jesus was creating a heretical movement to challenge their establishment. Honestly, they didn’t really care about people, but about their own positions and about preserving the status quo.

How did Jesus respond? Read verse 3. Jesus ignored their specific question for the time being and turned attention to something else—the authority of their teaching. They were supposed to be teaching the Bible, but what they were actually teaching was tradition. Jesus gave them a concrete example. Read verses 4–6. At first this seems a bit hard to understand. But basically, they were giving people a loophole for not having to spend money on their aging parents. They were telling people they could use the spiritual-sounding excuse that they had dedicated all their life savings to God. It was likely these religious leaders were hoping people would give their money to them in the temple, not to their aging parents. It was a clear contradiction to the plain teaching of the Bible.

Traditions are not always bad; they *become* bad when we emphasize them more than what the Bible actually says, or even worse, when they actually contradict the Bible’s teachings. The Bible is our authority for faith and practice, not human traditions. It means we shouldn’t believe based on our own ideas or feelings, or on what people around us are believing, but based on what the Bible teaches. It also means we shouldn’t be practicing certain traditions just because we’ve always done them or everyone else is doing them or they feel good to us, or comfortable. We should make practicing the Bible’s teachings our top priority. The basic, fundamental things, like honoring our parents. Jesus wants us to follow him as first priority, but he also wants us to honor our parents. Just because it’s hard, we shouldn’t be looking for loopholes for our convenience.

Jesus went on to strongly rebuke them. Read verses 7–9. Based on Isaiah’s prophecy he was making a broad assessment of their entire religious system. He called them “hypocrites.” In Greek it means someone who wears a mask, meaning, an actor, someone who pretends to be someone they’re not. In the case of these religious leaders, they were pretending to be holy when they were not. They were pretending to be shepherds of their people when they were not. They were pretending to love and honor God when they did not. They were acting like they were worshiping God, but Jesus said they were doing it only with their lips, not with their hearts. Someone once said there may be a lip section in heaven, where only people’s lips make it in, because they always talked so well, but their hearts and lives didn’t match what they said. It’s better to be quiet and have a right heart before God rather than being talkative, teaching others and not practicing what we know. How can we not become hypocrites? We should focus not on following many dos and don’ts, but on truly coming to God through his word, learning of him and seeking to love and honor him in all we do. In chapter 6 Jesus taught us not to give to the needy, pray or fast for people to see us and be impressed, but to do these things only for God to see. Later, Jesus will say about the Pharisees, “Everything they do is done for people to see…” (23:5). It wasn’t just the Pharisees’ problem; we can so easily turn into people who live to impress others—trying to say all the right things and look a certain way. It’s all for our own honor and glory. Instead, even though it’s invisible, we need to train ourselves to live before the eyes of God, and do things to honor him.

Then Jesus goes back to the original question about not washing hands. Read verses 10,11. The Pharisees were teaching that if someone ate food with unwashed hands, they would become defiled. As Jesus already pointed out, there is no specific Bible teaching about this—it was a human tradition developed within Judaism. Without explaining much here, Jesus is simply saying that what comes out of us is what defiles us. What does it mean to be “defiled”? It means to make unclean, dirty, impure or contaminated. It also can mean to vandalize or desecrate. The Pharisees originally tried to teach people to be holy, as God is holy. This is indeed an often-repeated Bible teaching, not a human tradition (1Pe1:16; Heb12:14; cf. Lev20:26, etc.). But over time, the Pharisees began teaching that it was about doing certain outward things. Jesus is saying that holiness starts not with outward acts or appearances, but with what is within us.

Read verse 11 again. Jesus is emphasizing what comes out of our mouths. The Pharisees’ critical words were actually defiling them. Why? It’s because Jesus was God’s chosen servant, working quietly, by the power of the Holy Spirit, bringing people healing (12:17–21). The Pharisees’ critical words were actually blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (12:31,32). Jesus had already rebuked them: “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned (12:34–37).

Look at verses 12–14. The disciples were scared that Jesus spoke so bluntly to these powerful Pharisees. But Jesus wasn’t afraid at all. He’d already given the parable of the weeds and the wheat. He’s saying here that some people who seem so religious are actually like weeds. Jesus said we shouldn’t struggle with them now, but leave them to God and let him deal with them. Jesus is also calling the Pharisees “blind guides.” They didn’t really know God or themselves or people or where they should go. They thought they were guiding others, but in fact, they themselves were falling into a pit for the self-righteous and were actually taking their followers with them. Jesus doesn’t want us to be following seemingly spiritual people with their outward activities; he wants us to follow him, who leads us by his grace to real inner healing.

Look at verse 15. The “parable” Peter is referring to is Jesus’ words in verse 11: “What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.” It was like a mystical saying that Jesus didn’t explain to the crowd. Look at verse 16. Jesus expected his disciples to have enough spiritual understanding to grasp what he meant. But he went on to explain it to them, anyway. Read verse 17. The Pharisees were being so meticulous about washing their hands and eating kosher foods. But Jesus is saying none of those external things actually has any impact on our souls. Read verse 18. Jesus is saying that what is in our hearts and what comes out of our mouths is what defiles us. Then he gets even more specific. Read verses 19,20. Our hearts, Jesus is saying, are at the root of our impurity. He actually already taught this earlier. He said if we have hatred for someone in our hearts, it’s the same as murder, and if we have lust in our hearts for someone, it’s the same as adultery (5:22a,28). The list of sins Jesus mentions in these verses are in direct violation of the Ten Commandments that have to do with the way we treat others. He’s also saying evil thoughts will erupt into evil words, and then, evil actions.

We don’t often think that what we’re saying is actually making us dirty, but it is. So how can we clean out our deceitful, dirty hearts (Jer17:9)? We can’t do with with our own effort or strength. The only way to clean up the cesspool in our hearts is to invite Jesus in (Eph3:17). That’s the foundation. Only with Jesus in our hearts can we start the cleaning process. We need to hide his word in our hearts and meditate on it (Ps19:4; 119:11). We need to obey the truth we learn in the Bible, and as we do, we purify ourselves (1Pe1:22). Even though we’re so sinful, we need to draw near to God with a sincere heart and ask him to cleanse our hearts with the blood of Jesus (Heb10:22; 9:14). As we welcome Jesus into our hearts, meditate on and obey his word, and sincerely ask him to cleanse us with his blood, our hearts are strengthened by grace (Heb13:9).

We live in a society that focuses on appearances. But as Christians we need to focus not on our hidden, inner life. What do we think about? How do we think of others? Are we listening to our sinful nature, or are we really listening to what God is trying to tell us through the Holy Spirit? Read verse 11 again. May God help us focus on having a changed heart through the grace of Jesus.