

Jesus and Purity

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus² and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”⁶ He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.” **Mk 7v1-8 (NIV)**

¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”¹⁶¹⁷ After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.¹⁸ “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them?¹⁹ For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)²⁰ He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them.²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder,²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” **Mk 7v14-23 (NIV)**

Phrases

Why is that when I am going out the house. I can always find my car keys, but not say my mobile.
Because I have a place where the keys live,

Finish the phrase. A place for everything, and ...
..everything in it’s place.

We are much happier when things are as they should be.

Another phrase often quoted is ‘Cleanliness, is next to Godliness’. But is there any truth in that?

A place for mud

When I was 16, and working on a market Gardner, I had a box of vegetables that I had picked and I walked it down to the farm shop, couldn’t see anyone, so walked in the shop and dropped the box off near the counter. I was walking past my old boss Grinder leaning on the packing shed. Who said to me in a quiet but firm voice “ If I were you lad, I would start running !”. I looked behind me, and his wife was coming after me waving a broom. She has just finished cleaning the shop floor, put away the mop, and returned to my muddy footprints. This was her way of re-educating me on her purity laws. On that occasion, I outran her, and I was careful to never leave muddy footprints on her shop floor again.

Dirt is matter out of place. Soil and mud does not make a field unclean, because that is where it belongs, not on a shiny shop floor. We are not comfortable if we step in dog poo, it does not belong on my white trainers, or on my lounge carpet if I don’t notice in time. When discovered we have to do something to put things back in their place. So here we have a purity system, where pure or clean simply means in place, and impure or unclean simply means out of place.

This system of having things in their place, helps us function in a society, Not just cleanliness, but what we should wear, where we should go etc Awareness, and then compliance helps us fit in. When something is out of place, then then things feel wrong or deviant. Try stepping into a lift where everyone is facing the door, but instead of turning round, stand facing everyone, and see how you feel, and how they start looking confused with you,. If we conform we are with the in-crowd. If we don’t conform, it won’t be long before we our chased away with a broom, or a sharp tongue Doors are closed. You don’t want to be left out in the cold, so we do our best to conform with our known but our unwritten purity systems, and do our best to bring others into line if they are not in line with expectations. If they are deviant !

Temple Purity Maps.

To keep everything in order, the Temple had a purity system for the Jews with a series of purity maps, that they were expected to follow. If they did then everything would be in its place, and cleanliness would bring godliness. There was the...

Map of Times – What you should do and when. When to circumcise your baby. The dates of the Jewish festivals that you should support. Every Saturday, obey the Sabbath, and here is a long list of rules for that day. This included 39 'categories' of work that you must not do !

Map of Persons – Who you can marry; who you can eat with; who you can't touch etc

Map of Things –What you mustn't touch, or lie on, or sit on. What things or animals were clean or unclean. What you could and couldn't sacrifice.

Map of Meals – What foods could be eaten. How food should be grown or reared. How it should be prepared. What vessels you can serve the food etc

There were the equivalent of 35 pages of instructions just on how to wash a pot.

Not everyone is going to remember all the rules and keep to each one, but the religious folk, particularly the Pharisees will be on hand to remind you and keep you clean.

Why all the rules?

The Jews had the Law, the Torah which included the 10 commandments. However the extra rules and regulations were gleaned from the combined wisdom of generations of Rabbis, and were initially intended as guidance on how to avoid breaking the law. They gave everyone the same reference point, so that everything could be in its place, and that way together you all upheld the Jewish traditions,

Imagine you have bought an expensive cream carpet for the lounge. To keep it looking nice, you make a house rule – do not stain the the new carpet. Simple rule, but how do you avoid accidental stains. Well the most likely spillage is say from coffee cups. So you make rules to avoid spillages. Don't walk around with a cup, but always put it down on the coffee table. But never place it within 3 inches of the edge, and use a saucer. You must sit in a chair and drink from the table. Don't leave the coffee unattended. What about cups of tea. OK, we will extend the rule to cover all drinks. There you are. Follow those rules and you won't spill a drink on the new carpet. Now lets talk up what you wear on your feet.... Etc

So you have one law – no staining the carpet, but end up with many rules do prevent you doing it.

Jesus broke the purity laws

When the newest Rabbi, Jesus from Nazareth, arrived on the scene, he soon had intense opposition from these religious guys. Why was that? Why were they not pleased to have this great advocate of the Jewish faith amongst them? Well, mostly because of one thing, he broke the purity laws. He wouldn't faithfully follow their maps.

He touches lepers, not allowed; touches dead people, not allowed; lets a menstruating women touch him, not allowed; (e.g. Mt 8v3; 9v25, 9v20). He goes into any house, eats anything offered, even recline with tax collectors and sinners – none of it allowed. Deviant. Deviant. Deviant.

Not washing their hands properly

Jesus is travelling with his disciples and encounters some Pharisees who have come out from Jerusalem, to promote their understanding of the Torah and its rules, and convert other Jews into their practices. One of the rules they had, was to pour cold water over your hands before eating. They notice that some of his disciples were not doing this.

Marks Gospel tells us that these Pharisees approach Jesus and try to use this to publically shame him, and thus discredit his ministry. But Jesus was more than a match for them.

“Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?” ⁶ He replied, **“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’** ⁸ **You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”**

Why did Jesus not conform ?

If these regulations were there to help the Jews uphold their traditions, then why did Jesus not simply follow them, and keep in with the Pharisees. Surely he would have been more successful if he had done so, and not riled them up in this way.

So four reasons..

1. Traditions are human and not divine

First, these traditions were human and not from God.

Jesus is clear in his arguments with the Pharisees, that he regards their so called wisdom as the ‘traditions of men’ (Mk 7v8). They are not Gods revelation. Peter goes even further in his first letter and calls it the empty or useless way of life handed down by your ancestors. (1 Peter 1v18).

The Old Testament writers paint a picture of a ‘God of Action’, he is on the pages of the story-book with his people as they live out this faith interactively with him. It is made clear that divine revelation is contrary to human knowledge. The roles of Prophet, Priest and King, that set out the guidance and direction for the people, were all God ordained roles and were intended to be God centred. Nowhere does the Old Testament support the words and traditions of any human group as authoritative, instead it judges and condemns their traditions as being mutually exclusive to Gods will. God’s people, must be actively living out their faith with their ear bent towards God, and not blindly following a traditionalist rule book.

Jesus is opposing the human traditions, but not the holy scriptures. It is the ‘human traditions’ that sourced the purity maps.

It is all performance, it is religion, it does not impress God. Jesus was no fan of tradition. It represents man taking confidence in practices that God has not established. It is about performing rituals, and not about having faith in God. .It avoids us focussing on our relationship with God.

2. Too hard to follow.

The second objection Jesus has was that these new rules were too hard to follow.

Initially theses oral rules were hedges to stop them breaking the Torah, the law, but then they got the same status as the law itself.

So in our example, you would be told off if you placed your coffee cup two inches from the tables edge, as much as if you had actually spilt coffee on the carpet.

Things like, you can not look in a mirror on the Sabbath, in case you see a grey hair and want to pull it out, which would mean you have done work on the Sabbath ! .

When this oral tradition was written down in 200AD (The Mishna) it had 186 pages of laws about cleanliness, based on just 5 verses of the Old Testament, including those 35 pages on how to wash a pot.

We might laugh at that now, but imagine you are a good Jew being told that you have to do all of these things or God won’t be happy with you. None of this was Gods desire, but it was taught as if it was

For anyone to keep the rules required extra-ordinary knowledge and tenacity. Jesus describes it as a 'heavy yoke or burden' It was far too much for most people. Those they gave up, were then labelled sinners, and shamed, and could be cut out of their communities.

For some people it would be impossible to keep all the rules. Peasant farms did not always have the water available for their ritual baths. Fishermen could not avoid touching dead fish. When you are on the road with your disciples, it all gets double difficult to manage the washing rituals. If you are crossing the Jordanian wilderness or desert, every drop of water is precious, if you pour it over your hands whenever you eat you will die of thirst.

So in our example, what does a 2 year old do. He can not sit at the table with a cup and saucer, he needs to have a tippee cup with a lid that has water or weak juice in, and toddle around the carpet. But if he does so, he is breaking your rules.

Jesus can see that this huge set of laws is placing an impossible burden on the people. When Jesus invites people to follow him, or be yoked to him, then he says that **his** burden on them is light, certainly much lighter than this deadweight dropped on you by the Pharisees.

3. They had changed the 'Law'

Jesus is not accused of breaking the Jewish law or Torah, but of not adhering to the traditions of the elders, their man made rules and regulations. But the religious rulers had actually change what was seen as the law, by rules and interpretations that suited them but were contrary to what the law had intended.

So they allow the money lenders into the temple courtyards intended for prayer, because they profited from their business, ripping people off with temple coinage and conversion rates. Jesus had a different take on this, and tipped their tables over.

Another way was to say my parents can use my possessions because they are 'corban', I have set them aside for God. In this way you keep things for yourself and don't keep the commandment to honour your mother and father. (Mark 7 v9-13), and they do many things like that.

Jesus goes on to say that nothing that enters your mouth is unclean, and this could be taken as him changing the laws that say you shouldn't eat pork or shell-fish. But is the Purity laws not the Kosher laws that Jesus is challenging in this encounter. Under purity laws if you had a whole lamb carcass ready to eat, and some-one dropped a dead fish on the head of it, then the whole lamb is defiled and you can't eat any of it, and must throw it all away ! For Jesus, If its kosher, then you can eat it, whatever the purity laws say.

So Jesus is not throwing out the law, he is throwing out the changes that the rabbinical teachings have made to the law.

Jesus is not attacking Gods law, he is attacking those who have changed Gods law !

4. They missed the main point on purity.

So Jesus opposed the purity laws because they were human traditions and not divine, they were too hard to follow, and they changed the Jewish law, But more than that, they had missed what Gods purity actually was.

It is not what goes you touch, or anything that goes into you that makes you impure. Edible stuff goes into your stomach and out your anus, and doesn't make you impure. it is what goes into your mind and comes out of your heart that makes you impure.

These are the vessels that you need to protect and keep clean, not pots and plates, but your heart and mind. Jesus says

"What comes out of a person is what defiles them. ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit,

lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ *All these vile things come from inside and defile a person.” [Mk 7v18-23]*

The vessels to keep clean are your **mind** and your **heart**. Keep these clean, so you can keep yourself pure from evil thoughts, sexual immorality, greed, deceit, arrogance etc etc. That is your purity in the kingdom of God, that is your purity map, not the traditions of men.

The Pharisees were not loving and caring towards the peasants, did not see their hardship, and their need for support, they just saw them as bodies that should uphold their rules and regulations or be shamed, and thrown out of their communities, for not keeping their man made laws. That is why Jesus said

“These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. [v6]

We are called to an Interactive Faith

We are called to listen and be interactive with our God. You do not keep yourself pure by being a slave to a rulebook based on the traditions of men, but by opening your mind and heart to the interactions of God.

I wonder how many times I have put more effort into following church rules and regulations than listening to Gods voice for my life. Where I have broken such rules, they have often been unintentional.

I wonder how many human traditions we engage in our churches. I was a youth leader at one church, and was preparing the sanctuary for a special service. I was fairly new, and did not know the rule that the large movable wooden pulpit, should NOT be moved under any circumstances, and got into trouble with the church secretary, when she discovered that I had got my team to move it away for the youth event, and moved it back later. Many things that should have been challenged were left unchallenged.

We all have traditions, rules and regulations, that we live by and they do help us, but what was right for one season, may not be right for the next season. One thing that the global pandemic has taught is to be alert, because the rules keep changing ! What we do now, we couldn't do a year ago. We need to be interactive with what is happening not just on the physical world, but in the spiritual world too.

I invested three decades in helping to keep 8 Nuclear Power stations safe in the UK. Interestingly in the US, they have a regulator that presents a very detailed set of codes with thousands of rules and conditions which have to be met to keep the stations operating safely, However in the UK, it is very different. We have just a set of 36 license conditions that must be met in order to be allowed to keep our license to operate. Condition 14 was to have adequate arrangements for the production and assessment of safety documents. That was one of my areas, It is then up to us to tell the regulator how we are going to do this, how we will produce safety cases which allow us to modify the plant. Us the operator, and them the regulator had the same agenda of safe operation, and we had to work with them to ensure we satisfy them with everything we do, or else its sorry, lights out. It wasn't always easy finding agreement on some issues, but I enjoyed my interactions with them. It was a dynamic relationship, not a distant one of blindly following codes whether you understand there purpose or not.

We are called to that type of faith interacting daily with God, not blindly following rules, whether they are scriptures we have picked out at random (probably taken out of context), or rules set down by our church or denomination.

I love in Psalm 40 where says 'The Lord me to sing a new song.', then inserting this into the words in the letter of Hebrews (13v8) where we are told that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. It is brilliant, because we have this consistent and eternal God, yet a creative one, doing something new yesterday, today and forever.. He is our 'full of surprises' interactive God.

That is why, he returned to heaven and sent us the Holy Spirit, to encourage us, help us, teach us, guide us. We keep to Gods purity maps by engaging with God through the Holy Spirit. Making him an active part of our story. If you have important decisions to make, involve him, ask him. Don't go it alone.

We are called to a higher law – the law of love

A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees. “If you are willing, you can make me clean”.

The truth is no-one else would have been willing. The law says you can not reach out and touch this man. Thankfully Jesus was operating to a higher law, the law of love. Jesus reached out and touched the man, “I am willing, be clean”, and the man was healed.

Rules, regulations, and traditions, may help us to do the right thing, but the incomparable love of Jesus is our trump card over all of that.

Both Peter and Paul found this out. Peter was instructed to eat food he had never eaten before as Jew, so that he could reach out to a gentile centurion and his family. He protested at first, that wasn't in his rule book, but God told him straight. “**if I say its clean, then don't you tell me its impure !**” (Acts 10v15). He had to change, because Jesus loved this family and wanted to save them.

The Apostle Paul had to thrash out with the other apostles in Jerusalem what to expect of the Gentiles that were now following Jesus. They went interactive with God and decided on less rules for them, they should not eat blood, strangled animals, or food sacrificed to idols, and avoid sexual immorality. But didn't need to be circumcised etc. They had to change their rule book for the Gentiles. Why, because Jesus loved them, and wanted them to be disciple without un-necessary burdens laid on them.

I once had a pastor who only smoked cigarettes when he was doing home visits to regular smokers. He would offer them a cigarette, they would relax, and as he lit up, they would open up to him. Personally, I would not smoke, but for him, he felt it was the right strategy, and I respect him for that. I know those who he visited loved him for it. He was not following a rule book, or writing one for other pastors, he was seeking the Holy Spirit, and following what he felt was right for him. He was actively interacting with God. Why because he had the love of Jesus in him for these smokers.

I was doing a service in some-ones home in Macedonia, accompanied by a Christian lady in her 70s who was an ex-Buddhist. Half way through our service the host asked us if we would like a glass of whiskey. I thought about it and said yes thankyou. She then added, I would like one too please. Of course I am not going to start drinking whiskey everytime I preach, but at that moment at that time, whilst we did not particularly want whiskey, we were being interactive and doing what was culturally the right and Jesus loving thing to do.

Whenever we are following advice or rules, and say what would the love of Jesus do in this situation ?

We are called to purity of mind and heart.

Jesus knew and taught that nothing we touched or eat makes us impure, but it is what comes out of heart that makes us impure.

The evidence of an impure or sinful heart in the evil deeds and attitudes. that Jesus lists, greed, lust, envy, pride, arrogance etc That is the heart we are born with. We can not wash away our sins ourselves. It does not matter how many religious rules and regulations you can follow and tick off, it will not clean up your heart. You can't make a pure heart by your own efforts only God can. We need to be born again. We don't want our old heart cleansed we need it transplanted. We need this new heart, we need to become a new creation, we need this new life in Jesus, one where we are following him and interacting with him.

Then we need to protect our minds and our hearts from all the negative influences that will come against us.. Be careful what we let in, what we watch, what we click on, what we listen to, what we entertain within ourselves. This is where we put our efforts not in blindly keeping up traditions, or following rules and regulations.

We have the bible to help us, and it is important that we are both read our scriptures and meditate on them, when we are seeking guidance from Jesus.

When he died and said it was finished, there wasn't a large book of rules and regulations nailed to the cross, there was just Jesus. He is our everything, and he left us the Holy Spirit so we could be interactive with Him.

Phrases revisited

SO should there be, a place for everything, and everything in its place.

Yes, but Jesus is our everything, then we need to have a place for Jesus, and then have Jesus in our place. That place being our hearts and minds.

Is cleanliness next to Godliness. No having Jesus in our hearts and minds in next to Godliness.

Its okay for our bodies to get messy for Jesus ! But it is our heart and our mind we want cleaned up and protected.

Conclusions

If Jesus in your heart and in your mind, and you turn to him daily, then good things will come out of you, not those vile things that Jesus listed to his disciple, but instead his love, his peace, his compassion, his joy, his light and his love. This is his purity.

We are in the story of life, God is there with us, Jesus is in the story with us, the Holy Spirit is on our story too. We need to be interacting and evaluating our position as we move forward in our faith, not just blindly and religiously doing what we have always done, but living a creative Christian live following the voice of Jesus. .He wants to interact with you daily, He wants to lead you on, singing a new song in your life.

It is in relationship with Jesus, that we work out our own uniqueness, how we become fully the person, who we were intended to be, the one God knitted together in our mother's womb, the person that we were always intended with Gods strength to become, to do the things that he had God ahead of us and prepared for us to do.

Create in me, a pure heart and a pure mind O Lord, and help me to hear your voice and interact with you daily

Amen.