

Purity and Defilement

It seems inevitable that mortals try to shape their “gods” in their own image, and their religions as either other-worldly mysticism or a system of rewards and punishment. Jesus appeared in the full image of humanity with the heart and character of God. As in the first century, so it is in our century that we continue to interpret Jesus’ life and words without fully understanding his cross and resurrection.



Michael K. Olmsted

Hear how Jesus responds to every generation’s spiritual ignorance: “You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines’ (Isaiah 29:13). We need to read today’s passage with an understanding that we who claim to be God’s people often make the same theological mistakes as the religious leaders of the first century.

Our story begins with the arrival of a delegation of religious authorities from headquarters in Jerusalem, confronting Jesus and his dangerous liberalism: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat” (v. 2). Yes, you heard them loud and clear! Through the generations and spirited theological debates about how to maintain a holy life, the scholars had developed multiple rules to prove one’s faith in God. It had become a religious quid pro quo system of performance for spiritual assurance.

This story is a glaring illustration of how lost all of us can become when faith is reduced to traditions and rituals. The hand-washing rituals before a meal had become complex with careful movement of hands and arms so the water first dripped off the fingers and then the elbows, ensuring

any contamination of the world did not touch the food. Someone had witnessed Jesus’ disciples failing to observe the ritual, which meant they were unclean before God! Why would Jesus allow such blatant flaunting of the Law if he expected anyone to respect his teaching?

Jesus answers their question precisely with the obvious truth: “Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” (v. 3). Sadly, Jesus’ question continues to call our modern Christian culture to answer. Tradition can be a powerful reminder of truth, a connection to every generation since Jesus’ ascension to be with the Father, a check against doctrinal error and the mistakes of the past. But tradition can also become a substitute for God’s love and grace. The Ten Commandments and all the religious laws of Israel were not the way to earn God’s love; instead it is guidelines for living as God’s people in the present world.

A simple reading of the four gospels reveals clearly that being a child of God is verified when we live morally, care for the downtrodden, offer love and hope to the least of these, and love God above all else. Jesus chose the most embarrassing and indefensible tradition his accusers had created to confront their hypocrisy. Children were to love and care for their parents as those parents grew older. There were no pensions, no government programs to help the sick and infirm, only family support. Jesus says to his critics, “Suppose a person makes a generous gift or pledge to the Temple ... such an honorable gesture! You say he is honor-bound to keep his promise. But the law says honor your father and mother! You are experts in the law of Israel, so you say that a man can now refuse to care for his struggling parents because he has pledged his money to the Temple? Laws are to be obeyed, but man can ignore his suffering parents for a

religious pledge?

“Someone is turning the law upside down! You become upset with me and my disciples over ritual hand washing,” Jesus says, “but the real uncleanness is not the dust on your hands but the selfishness in your hearts!” Jesus turned to the crowd that was witnessing this debate and said, “Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (v. 11).

Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes “blind guides of the blind ... both will fall into a pit” (v. 14). He continues by reminding the crowd and his disciples that food is digested and eliminated through a natural process but the words we speak and the intentions of our heart often produce “evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander ... these are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile” (v. 20).

Examining this debate between religious legalism and the grace of God should remind us all that legalism can never substitute for God’s love and grace. The current social and political climate in the U.S. serves as a reminder that even religious leaders can forget the meaning of grace, morality, and compassion. The essence of following Jesus is to live by his example and remember it is only by God’s grace that we will enter God’s kingdom. Doctrines are important, living is a testimony, and faith through Christ is the only true foundation. In his “Sermon on the Mount” Jesus said “you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son (not a cumbersome rule book), that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). What does your faith show the world: purity or defilement?

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.