

What Really Makes Us Dirty?

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Matthew 15:1-20

Here is something worth noticing: Jesus himself was the sharpest critic of religious fakery who ever lived. He did not come to defend institutional religion. He came after it. And the people he came after hardest were not the obvious sinners, *but the most visibly devout people in Israel*. That should stop us. Before we settle into this passage feeling like we are watching someone else get corrected, we need to ask: could the same critique land on us?

Religious leaders (Pharisees and scribes) traveled all the way from Jerusalem to challenge Jesus. Their complaint? His disciples did not wash their hands in the ceremonial way the elders' tradition required. This was not about hygiene. It was a religious ritual. They believed skipping it made a person **spiritually** unclean.

The Big Question: Who is really breaking God's rules, the disciples who skip a man-made tradition, or the Pharisees who twist God's actual Word to avoid caring for their parents?

The Key to answering is found in Matthew 15:11, *"It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."*

I. The Problem with Religious Performance (Matthew 15:1-6)

A. The Pharisees attack Jesus with a tradition, not a commandment.

1. They accused the disciples of breaking *'the tradition of the elders'* (15:2)
2. Jesus flips the attack: *"Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"*
3. The irony: Pharisees came to condemn based on tradition, and Jesus instead exposes as lawbreakers.

B. The Corban Trap — "given to God" or "consumed on your own lusts" (15:5-6; Mark 7:11)

1. God's command: *"Honor your father and your mother"* (Exodus 20:12)
2. Pharisees taught: if you declared your money *"given to God"* (Corban), you were discharged from using it to care for your parents.
3. Result: *"So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God"* (v. 6).
 - a) The Pharisee's answer when his aging parents needed help: *"I'm sorry — I've already devoted those resources to the Temple."* A religious technicality used to escape human obligation.
 - b) How do we excuse ourselves from obedience based upon tradition, technicality, or false application of truth?

The law of God must not be set aside by the inventions of men. Tradition that contradicts the Word of God is not piety — it is rebellion dressed in a robe.

John Calvin, Harmony of the Gospels

II. The Portrait of a Hypocrite (Matthew 15:7-9)

A. Jesus calls them hypocrites and quotes Isaiah 29:13, *"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me"* (15:8)

1. The word hypocrite comes from the Greek for an actor — someone playing a role. What you see on the outside is a performance; the inside is something else entirely.
2. Their worship is called 'vain' — empty, accomplishing nothing before God.

B. Three marks of a hypocrite from the passage:

1. He is a verbal professor & an inward denier. He says the right words; his heart is far from God.
2. He is outwardly clothed but inwardly naked and cold. Religion as costume, not transformation.
3. He demands conformity to his own rules while loosening God's commands. (15:6). - *"A man may be a great professor of religion, and yet have no true religion at all. He may wash his hands, and yet have a heart full of all uncleanness."* Matthew Henry

III. What Really Defiles You Before God (Matthew 15:10-11: 17-20)

A. Jesus explains to the crowd: defilement flows out, not in (vv. 10-11).

1. Food passes through the stomach and is gone. It never touches the soul.
2. Words and deeds flow from the heart — and the heart is where the real problem lives.

B. The list from the heart (15:19), *"Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander."*

1. **Illustration:** If a cup is full of muddy water and you bump it, muddy water spills out. You cannot pour clean water out of a muddy cup. Whatever fills the heart spills out of the mouth and into life. The problem is not what is going in — the problem is what is already there.
 2. **Important clarification:** This is not a self-help principle. Managing your inputs more carefully does not clean the cup. The problem is in the cup itself. The Pharisees were doing exactly that, managing external inputs, controlling what was visible, and Jesus says it accomplishes nothing before God. (This is why “religious moralism” will fail in the day of judgment)
- C. **What this means before a holy God:**
1. We are talking about standing before the God of **Isaiah 6**, who is holy, holy, holy, with a heart Jesus has just described as the source of murder, adultery, theft, and slander.
 2. The Pharisees were the most outwardly righteous people in Israel. And Jesus says their righteousness was empty. If their performance could not meet the standard, what does that say about ours?
 - a) *“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:20)*
 - b) That is not a call to try harder. That is a verdict. No one gets there by performance.

IV. The Gospel Answer (Matthew 15:13–14)

A. **The bad news:**

1. Jesus declares the Pharisees are ‘*blind guides*’ (**15:14**). They cannot lead others to God when they themselves are lost. Religion without regeneration is blindness with confidence.
2. The diagnosis from every cross-reference points the same direction:
 - a) **Psalms 51:10** — *“Create in me a clean heart, O God.”* David did not say, *“Help me improve my heart.”* He said create. This requires a Creator.
 - b) **Ezekiel 36:26** — *“I will give you a new heart and a new spirit.”* Not a repaired heart. A new one. This is God’s own promise for the New Covenant.
 - c) **1 Samuel 16:7** — *“The LORD looks on the heart.”* What He sees there, apart from grace, is exactly what **Matthew 15:19** lists.

B. **The Good News:**

1. The very thing Isaiah said the Pharisees lacked — nearness of heart to God — is what Christ purchases for His people.
 - a) **Ephesians 2:13**, *In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*
2. The washing that matters is not of hands but of the heart by the Holy Spirit.
 - a) **Titus 3:5**, *He saved us... by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.*

C. **The honest question:**

1. The heart is the problem — so what do I actually do with that?
2. **Here is the answer the text gives:** You cannot fix it. No amount of tradition, discipline, or religious performance gets there. The Pharisees proved that. What you can do is come to the One who said He came to give new hearts.
3. The Pharisee practiced religion. The Christian receives a new heart. These are not the same project.
 - a) **Ask yourself honestly** — Am I managing the outside while the inside is untouched? Is my Christianity more about what others see than what God sees? The good news of this passage is not just a warning — it is a door. The blind guides cannot lead you there. But Jesus can.

V. Light for our Path

- A. The Pharisees were the most religious people in Israel, and Jesus said their religion was empty. Clean hands. Dirty hearts.
- B. This passage is not a lesson about being more sincere. It is a diagnosis. The heart is the problem. And the heart cannot fix itself. Every strategy the Pharisees tried — more tradition, more ritual, more visible compliance — left them further from God, not closer.
- C. The cup must be cleaned on the inside first (**Matt. 23:26**). And only God can do that — through the blood of Christ and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit.
- D. We must never substitute tradition for Scripture. We must never mistake outward religious activity — church attendance, good behavior, religious language — for the genuine inner transformation that only Christ produces.
- E. The invitation is this: Stop performing. Come to Christ.