

“The Inside Story on Cleanliness and Godliness”

(Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9; James 1: 17-27; Psalm 15; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

As often as we read a gospel story, I usually suggest that you need to put yourself *into* the story, identify with the characters, try their sandals on and see how they fit. Normally, you're encouraged to identify with the *disciples* or, better still, with Jesus. Today I'm going to do something very different and potentially dangerous: I'm going to ask you to put yourself in the place of the *Pharisees*—just this once, mind you, and you must promise not to make a *habit* of it. But today, you need to get a sense of that *opposition voice* in this particular story.

Here's an exercise to help you get into a Pharisee mindset. Suppose I told you it has just been confirmed that the Covid Delta Variant virus is present right here in this room. It seems a visitor last Sunday had been exposed to the virus and has since contracted the disease. We found out about this late yesterday and of course haven't had time to disinfect every surface. And there's a good chance that some of you have been shaking hands with each other, and others may have been sneaking a hug. What's the first thing that news makes you want to do? There's going to be a stampede to the hand sanitizers, isn't there? It makes you want to scrub with the strongest cleanser you can find and within moments of that scrub, you'll probably want to do it again, maybe even a little harder. As soon as you get home, you'll want to scrub every inch of your body, then everything in the refrigerator, then you'll start scouring pots and pans, disinfecting the dishes, cutlery, countertops, and don't forget the dog!

Once you hear about the virus right in *your* neighbourhood, you can just feel it on your skin, can't you? And right there, you have a sense of what it felt like to be a Pharisee. This thing they had about washing hands and everything else, we might think of as a mindless habit or meaningless ceremony. But in reality, it was an *obsession*. Even though they didn't know a thing about viruses or bacteria, they had a huge thing about *cleanliness*—because *that* had to do with a proper relationship with *God*. No cleanliness, no godliness. If you're *unclean*, then you're untouchable by God, out of reach, disqualified from the relationship.

When the Pharisees in our story tear into Jesus about his disgustingly, deliberately dirty disciples, I don't think they're just trying to give him a hard time about petty rules or trying to pull a “holier than thou.” True, they do *those* things on a lot of *other* occasions, but on this one I think they are genuinely shocked and horrified. To see someone eating with filthy hands just about makes *them* sick—and let's face it, hand filth back in the first century was probably a lot filthier than our worst in the twenty-first. Think about it.

For the Pharisees, and keep in mind that they really were the *growing edge* and the *popular* front of Judaism in the first century, their obsession with cleanliness was massive. They had a monstrous fear about taking something dirty into themselves and being sickened by it, being polluted and tainted, and then getting *spiritually quarantined*. And they were doubly shocked that Jesus,

claiming to be a teacher and prophet, would allow the *contrary* view to go unchallenged and would actually encourage public disregard of such a vitally important regulation. To a Pharisee, that's not just wrong, it's *sick*. And it sickens you to watch it. It's like being infected by a virus that someone else was too lazy or irresponsible to wash off their hands before they grabbed your hand and started shaking it.

The reply of Jesus is, of course, in his *classic* form. He loves to take hold of an issue like this one, reach right down its throat and pull it inside out. And that's exactly what he shows these Pharisees—the ritually clean, supposedly pure, fastidiously scrubbed person, only *inside out*. Now all that religious traditional stuff is out of sight; the real *inner* nature is on display. And unless the *commands* of God and the will *to live by faith* are there at the heart of that inside-out person, it's not going to be a pretty sight. What's *inside* can be much worse and more seriously sickening than anything you'll ever encounter on the *outside*. Unless the heart has been cleansed by faith in the forgiving God, that inside-out person is going to have them *all* vomiting in the streets and falling to the fever. There's a pandemic of social and spiritual *disease* in every *uncontrolled, unforgiving, un-cleansed* heart, and that's a lot scarier than any wee virus.

The Pharisees thought it was all about fighting the evident dirt and external disease in the battle between purity and filth, and they thought it was all about rules and procedures that come into play in that battle. But in reality, says Jesus, it's the much *older* battle between *religion and faith*, and there's a much deeper dimension to that thing about cleanliness and godliness. Religion, you see, is entirely focussed on *outward* appearance and public performance. Religion wants everyone to *look* the same and *do* the same, in the same *way* every time, and religion is going to draw a first line distinction between “us” who look and do the same, and “them”, which means everyone who looks or does *differently*.

In pulling the specimen inside out, Jesus is saying that the old distinction between “us” and “them” is already a major part of the problem. Thinking the outside matters *more* than the inside is another part of the problem. Thinking you can straighten out and fix with little rules a *condition of human nature*, well, that's both a problem and a joke.

Some problems just can't be fixed with human rules. According to an old story, Queen Victoria was once at a diplomatic reception in the palace. The guest of honour was an African chieftain. All went well during the meal until, at the end, finger bowls were served. The African guest had never seen a British finger bowl, and no one had thought to brief him beforehand about its purpose. So he took the finger bowl in his two hands, lifted it to his mouth and drank its contents—to the last drop! For a minute or more, there was breathless silence among the British upper crust and then they began to whisper to one another. But all that whispering stopped in the very next moment as the Queen silently took *her* finger bowl in her two hands, lifted it and drank its contents! A moment later 500 very surprised British lords and ladies were simultaneously lifting and drinking the contents of their *own* fingerbowls. It may be “against the rules” to drink from the fingerbowl, but on that particular evening Queen Victoria

changed the rules—because she was, after all, the Queen. Rules couldn't *fix* that situation but *breaking* them certainly *could*. Jesus would have chuckled at that one. No doubt his disciples, too.

The inside story in the battle between the normal state of our *inner* nature and God's call to come to him and get close to him anyway—the *inside* story is all about faith in the God who is big enough to forgive, *compassionate* enough to heal, and *tender* enough to kiss it better right where it hurts. It's about faith in God *being exactly* who God *is* and caring enough to do away with the old "us and them" mentality—which is precisely what God was doing in sending his Son among *us*, as *one of* us. The highest order of the old "us and them" distinction is *gone* the moment Jesus arrives. And all the rest of those religious rules are gone with it. Now we're *entirely* in the realm of *faith*, and the cleanliness that's *really* next to godliness is the one that God simply *gives* us by *forgiving* our filth, by cleansing our dirt right where it begins, by changing us from the *inside out* so that God's own *Spirit* can live and breathe *within* us.

The Pharisees were not *wrong* in wanting to be clean, if only on the outside. Where they went wrong was in thinking they were indeed clean by virtue of a few splashes of water on the outside, while the inner condition was just as rotten as ever. On that score, they were fooling themselves. But then, in thinking and believing *they* were clean while all of "them" were hopelessly filthy. In that thinking, they were hypocrites of the worst order. Frauds and phonies just waiting to be found out.

There's an ancient story about King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba that didn't quite make it into the biblical text but survived nonetheless in legend form. The story claims that the Queen of Sheba, when planning her visit to King Solomon, did what a lot of others had done in that situation—she tried to *trip him up* in his famous *wisdom* by giving him a puzzle or problem that he *couldn't solve*. She brought with her to his court a huge array of flowers of a rather unusual sort. These were *artificial* flowers, but so perfectly formed, coloured and textured that no human eye could distinguish them from real flowers. She put them in a vase on Solomon's table, next to some other flowers already there. As Solomon came in, the Queen of Sheba is reported to have said, "Solomon, you are the wisest man in the world. Tell me without touching these flowers, which are real and which are artificial." It is said that Solomon studied the flowers for a long time and said nothing, until finally he commanded, "Open the windows and let the bees come in." See that? There are ways to tell the artificial from the real—let the bees come in. They'll know which is real.

So, too, for our claims about being cleaner than others or *holier* than others, or more deserving of God's attention. Life has a million different kinds of "bees" that can smell out what's real and what isn't. Claiming to be *religious* offers *no exemption* from that test. If anything, the bees are going to sniff those ones out first.

Outward cleanliness, just like some kinds of beauty, doesn't usually go very deep. Rarely more than *skin* deep. It seems that a pirate captain once found a map that claimed to lead to buried treasure. After months of hard sailing, his crew caught site of an island right where the treasure map showed it to be. The captain and his first mate disembarked to search out the treasure, which was supposed to lie deep within a swamp at the centre of the island.

Sure enough, at the centre of the island they found a swamp. They bravely entered the swamp, even though their feet sank into the muck. As they proceeded and the swamp got deeper, oozy mud rose above their ankles and soon they were almost knee-deep in the stuff. Suddenly, the captain banged his shin against something very hard. He reached down, groping through the slime, and there was the treasure chest. Eagerly they pried the lock and discovered gold and jewels beyond imagination! The captain turned to his first mate and said, "Arrrr, matey, it's just like they say: *booty* is only *shin* deep!"

Booty or beauty, outward cleanliness, religious performance... all those things can be and usually are very *shallow* and very *fleeting*. But the inward cleanliness that begins deep in the heart, radiates outward. Note carefully how it differs from any exterior scrubbing. The inner cleansing begins with God's forgiveness. It begins with *God's* action, and there's nothing we could ever do to accomplish that. Unlike the outward scrubbing that can be motivated by obsessions or driven by fears, the inward process is drawn, not driven, it's *drawn* by *love* not fear, and it's drawn into a *lasting relationship* that emanates trust, confidence and peace. And that process lasts—for as long as you're *open* to God's mercy and grace, as long as you're willing and wanting to have the Holy Spirit live and work *within* you.

That kind of cleanliness is like *nothing else*. You find it *nowhere* else. It comes through *faith*, *not religion*; it comes from *God*, not us. And you'll soon be lost in a dirty diseased world without it. When it comes to cleanliness and godliness, don't settle for anything less than the *inside* story and the *life-changing* truth.

Rev. Steven K. Smith
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