

“Things That Defile”

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Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him,²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders;⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

(Mark 7:21-23)

Those who cherish Charles Schultz’ “Peanuts” comic strip will no doubt remember Pig Pen, the mild-mannered, affable kid who, as Charlie Brown once said, was “the only person I know who can raise a cloud of dust in a snowstorm.” His face and clothes were always grey and grimy, and he was perpetually surrounded by his own personal whirlwind of filth. While the other characters never said it out loud, we were left to assume that poor Pig Pen probably didn’t smell great, either. It was all, as one character said, enough to take the curl out of naturally curly hair.

When we were growing up, our parents knew that it wasn’t a good thing to be known as the dirty, smelly kid in class, so many of us had a lot of help making sure that didn’t happen. We all learned the ritual of regular baths, teeth brushing, and hair combing. At some point, we made the jump to deodorant. For me, it began with Right Guard spray, then at some point I stepped up to the sophistication of Mennen Speed Stick. Meanwhile, even the Boy Scouts reinforced these lessons. The Scout Law, which we recited at the end of every meeting, reminded us that a Scout is not only trustworthy, loyal, helpful, and courteous, but also “clean and reverent.” In a variety of ways, most of us learned early and often that cleanliness was next to a great many good things – Godliness, for sure, but also acceptance, respect, and popularity.

The Pharisees learned these lessons as well (even if, I expect, a lot of them could have used some Mennen Speed Stick on most days). To those who took seriously the faith of the chosen people of God, cleanliness was not just a matter of good manners but a matter of covenant law. Hygiene was something God expected. Habitual and ritual washing marked a person as someone who had faith and conviction, someone who was on the path



of the righteous. So, when they noticed that Jesus and his disciples were not washing properly before eating, they saw it both as a personal defilement and an affront to God. And, because they were always looking for some mud to throw at Jesus, they pounced upon the opportunity. “*Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?*” they trumpeted. “*How can you eat with defiled hands?*”

Jesus, in turn, pounced on the opportunity to teach a valuable lesson about what the law was really after, and about what really defiles. He begins by speaking the Pharisees language. He quotes the prophecy of Isaiah, who shared the lament of God that people were honoring God with their lips but their hearts were far away. As he quotes this ancient wisdom, however, Jesus also adds his own condemnatory spin. The prophet was right, Jesus said, about “you hypocrites.”

Even today, the charge is a serious one charged with emotion. It is a bold move to say to someone’s face that they are pretending to be something they are not – that they may be speaking and acting in respectable ways in public, but behind the scenes, out of the view of the wider world, their words and deeds are not respectable at all. In Matthew’s gospel, that accusation is much more pointed:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.¹

In the *Inferno*, part one of Dante’s epic Divine Comedy, the eighth circle of hell contains ten ditches or “bolgias.” Bolgia Six was reserved for hypocrites, the people who were the whitewashed tombs in life. They are forced to wear monk’s robes that on the outside appear to be made of gleaming gold, but which are in reality made of heavy lead. They are condemned to carry this burden through eternity. Now, that is a 14th century vision, so I offer it here only metaphorically and certainly not literally. But what bugged Dante was the same thing that bugged the prophet Isaiah, and that clearly bugs Jesus – which is people who pretend to be something they are not – who put forth a clean, respectful, even holy face on the outside, while their interior life is anything but clean, respectful, and holy.

I admit that it is hard to defend the scribes and Pharisees. Their behavior was pretty awful a lot of the time. And I think most people agree that hypocrisy – putting forth an image of light and concern, while in the shadows working to undermine and malign – is a particularly distasteful character trait. But in some ways I do think the scribes and Pharisees tend to get a bad wrap – not because what they said and did was OK, but because we are so quick to use them as scapegoats. We like to wag the finger at them and tell ourselves, “Well, at least I’m not *that* bad,” as if we do not do the exact same things they did on a regular basis. How many of us can say that our cups are just as clean on the inside as they are on the outside? How many of us can say that our day to day lives live up to the beautiful, polished images on our Instagram and Facebook pages? How many of us can say that we always avoid the defilement that can take root within our interior lives?

No, when Jesus chooses this moment to make the bold statement that “*There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what*

¹ Matthew 23:25-27.

defile,” I think Jesus is doing the same thing in this lesson that he does in the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus reminds everyone that, even though we take such pains to look clean on the outside, we also need to tend to interior defilement that is harder to see, he is making the same point that he makes on that Galilean hillside about murder, and adultery, and the seeking of revenge. Jesus is showing us that problems that seem external to us are really problems of the heart and the spirit..

When I took criminal law in my first year of law school, one key idea was repeatedly hammered into our heads. In our legal system, it is not enough to just think about a crime. It’s not a crime to think about killing someone. It’s not a crime to dream about burning someone’s house to the ground. It is only a crime if that thought becomes an action. It is only a crime if we actually pull the trigger or put the match to oily rags in the basement.

This same legal concept was operative in the Hebrew law. Guilt was found in external actions, not internal thought. You could have some pretty toxic thoughts on a regular basis, but as long as you did not act on them you were pretty much OK. Jesus, not only in his teaching but in his life, blew this distinction out of the water. He is not just interested in our outward behavior. Jesus wants our thoughts to be as clean as our actions. He wants the inside of our cup to be as clean as the outside. And it’s not just scribes and Pharisees who have to wrestle with that.

There are two implications of this teaching that I’ll name today. The first is that this teaching pushes us to be thoroughly honest with ourselves about our own defilement, our own sin. Essentially, we all have to do what alcoholics do in Step 4 of recovery, when they muster the courage to make “a searching and fearless moral inventory” of themselves. As people of faith, this inventory cannot be limited to our outward appearances and actions, but must also confront the dark corners of our minds, our hearts, and our consciences. It’s not just about what we do or do not do; it is about what we think about, fret about, and fume about.

The second thing this teaching should do is to make us more gracious and compassionate with the assumptions we make about others. It is the old adage about judging books by covers often being a mistake. Pig Pen, for example, is not a bad guy. Frieda calls him “an absolute mess” and says derisively that he ought to look in a mirror. But when he does, he optimistically replies, “On the contrary, I didn’t think I looked *that* good.”

Before the Christmas play, he sets an ethical goal for himself, saying “In spite of my outward appearance, I shall try to run a neat inn.”

The tables are even turned on his dirty exterior. “Don’t think of it as dust,” Charlie Brown says. “Think of it as maybe the soil of some great past civilization. Maybe the soil of ancient Babylon. It staggers the imagination. He may be carrying soil that was trod upon by Solomon, or even Nebuchadnezzar.”

Pig Pen is kind of amazing, really. He never lashes out, even when others put him down. He is an amazing musician who plays both the drums and the stand-up bass. He’s also got the keen instincts and lightning-quick reflexes to play third base on the baseball team. Anyone trusted to defend the “hot corner” has got to have some skills. But the thing I like most about Pig Pen is that he is real. If he is anything, he is authentic. He never pretends to be something he is not. He never denies his dirt, but he doesn’t let it drag him down, either. He is the antithesis of a hypocrite, the very opposite of a Pharisee, because I get the feeling that the inside of Pig Pen’s cup is actually much cleaner than the outside.

And if that could be said of us, then I have to think God would be pleased – that in God’s eyes, that would be more than enough.

One of my favorite songs by folk singer Carrie Newcomer is a poem based on what she calls “miracles clothed in the commonplace.” The key metaphor is a rock that is muddy and dirty on the outside. Its shape suggests nothing extraordinary, but that only serves to make what is inside so miraculous. The lyrics go like this:

*No you can't always tell one from another;
and it's best not to judge a book by its tattered cover.
I have found when I tried or looked deeper inside,
what appears unadorned might be wondrously formed.
You can't always tell but sometimes you just know.*

*'Round here we throw geodes in our gardens.
They're as common as the rain or corn silk in July.
Unpretentious browns and grays, the stain of Indiana clay,
they're what's left of shallow seas, glacial rock and mysteries,
and inside there shines a secret bright as a promise.*

*All these things that we call familiar
are just miracles clothed in the commonplace.
And you'll see if you try in the next stranger's eyes,
God walks around in muddy boots, sometimes rags and that's the truth.
You can't always tell, but sometimes you just know.*

*Some say geodes were made from pockets of tears
Trapped away in small places for years upon years
Pressed down and transformed, 'til the true self was born,
and the whole world moved on, like the last notes of a song,
a love letter sent without return address.*

*No you can't always tell one from another,
and it's best not to judge a book by its tattered cover.
I don't open them to see, folks 'round here just like me.
We have come to believe there's hidden good in common things.
You can't always tell but sometimes you just know;
You can't always tell but sometimes you just know.²*

It is easy to miss the beauty of a geode – the glittering, luminescent crystals that can be found on the inside – because it is wrapped in such a dirty, unassuming package. The

² Carrie Newcomer, “Geodes,” Philo/Umgd (2008). Accessed August 28, 2021. <https://genius.com/Carrie-newcomer-geodes-lyrics>.

Pharisees couldn't see it – couldn't see past Jesus' dirty hands. What they failed to realize is that Jesus' hands were always dirty... that he was always putting himself in positions that people said were unclean, because he could always see the beautiful center of every person.

Yes, Jesus' hands were always grimy, just as God's have been... from the moment the Lord's fingers pushed down into the soil, pulled up a heaping handful, and began to mold humankind in the image of God. We spend so much time worrying about the clean image we project to the world, and meanwhile God is busy tending to the garden, bringing the light of life out of the darkness of the dirt... walking "round in muddy boots, sometimes rags and that's the truth."

And still we so often rear up in disgust and judgment when we see others with dirt on their hands, while Jesus is busy hanging out with the kids – kids with grimy, sticky hands. Parents know – nothing attracts dirt like the sticky hands of a kid... but nothing speaks to the heart of Jesus stronger than the heart of a child, either. As the poet Martha Spong once wrote,

*They smudge the screen, leave prints on the doorjamb
with their unwashed hands.
I send them to the sink, call, "Did y'all use soap?"*

But Jesus says, "Come. Eat."³

In this world that is so hung up on appearances, may we hear this teaching of Jesus not as much of a condemnation, but rather an invitation to be honest and courageous with ourselves, gracious and kind to others. And may we each commit ourselves to a simple but bold mantra – that "In spite of my outward appearance, I shall try to run a neat inn."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

³ Martha Spong, "Dirty Hands." Accessed August 28, 2021. <https://marthaspong.com/2012/08/27/dirty-hands/>