

"The Dish on Defilement"

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Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat."

³He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?..."

¹⁰Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." (Matthew 15:1-3, 10-20)

The Old Testament has a lot of rules about what a person should and should not eat. Scholars still debate over why certain foods might have been prohibited, but germs and contamination certainly played a part. If people were getting sick after eating something, it made sense to avoid it. There was also a practical side to the rules about ritual washing. The cultic laws of Israel were not only markers of cultural identity; they also helped keep people healthy.

The problem with some of these rules, as Jesus saw it, was that strict adherence to them could be alienating. In their attempt to remain pure, strict rule followers were avoiding certain people and certain places. That's not always bad, except when it created a sinful kind of pride, one that said "look how much better we are than them... they don't even know how to wash their hands."

Those kinds of barriers – the ones that divide people into hierarchies of goodness or worthiness – were what Christ came to break down. So, he used this opportunity to challenge the way certain laws were being used against the greater purposes of God. God's people should not be so worried about what goes into one's stomach, he says. We should be much more worried about what comes out of our hearts.

A great example of how this idea is reflected in the natural world is the turkey vulture. If there is anything in nature that we would consider unclean, these birds are near the top of the list. Their favorite meal is road kill – dead and decaying bodies rife with bacteria that would be deadly to other animals. But not the turkey vulture. The acid in their stomachs is strong enough to dissolve toxins as strong as anthrax, rabies, and botulism. Even the bald skin on their faces, something that we might dismiss as ugly, serves as a protective mask to absorb and shield the rest of their bodies from the poisons. They are nature's perfectly crafted clean-up crew, specifically designed to take on messes that would kill most other



creatures. And while we are busy fretting over the kinds of things a turkey vulture is taking into its stomach, we are likely to miss the gift that the bird is giving to the world – how it is cleaning up a mess, leaving a place cleaner and safer than it was before.

In a way, that sums up the entire mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. He comes into a toxic situation, a mess that sinful human beings have created in the world. He alone has the divine capacity to confront the deathly disease. He takes that disease into himself, drinking the poison cup that no one else could survive, and in so doing, he cleans the world, making it possible for others to live.

As Jesus teaches and preaches on this particular day, the full scope of that mission is not yet in view. But he takes this opportunity to teach a vital lesson. Quit erecting silly, externally-focused rules about who is right and who is wrong, he says. Quit spending so much time debating who is clean and who is tainted. In fact, quit worrying so much about what other people are doing. Worry about what **you** are doing. What are you putting out into the world? What are you doing to make the world a cleaner, healthier, better place?

And while the Pharisees couldn't seem to move past the food and water we put into our mouths, Jesus was much more worried about a different way that our mouths can hurt us: specifically, the things we say. The **words** we speak. He had already been teaching on this very subject. *"A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him,"* Jesus had said, *"and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."*¹

I'm pretty sure that we do not think about this enough – that we will be held accountable for every empty word we have ever spoken – every harmful, hurtful, mean-spirited thing we have ever said. We will be judged by our words. Scripture talks about this danger all the time:

- Proverbs 12 says that *"lying lips are an abomination to the Lord"* ...
- Psalm 36 decries words that are wicked and deceitful...
- Psalm 50 warns those who give their mouths to evil, whose tongues frame deceit...
- and the apostle Paul drops the boom on all of us: "There is no one righteous, not even one... all have turned away.... Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness" (Romans 3:10-14).

In light of this clear teaching, biblical commentator Matthew Henry sums up the teaching of Jesus on this point like this: "We are polluted, not by the meat we eat with unwashed hands, but by the words we speak from an unsanctified heart."²

And it gets worse. It gets worse, because based on what I can tell our unsanctified hearts are growing more and more polluted by the day, because profane speech is more commonplace than ever. Here's just one example. A recent study by Cardiff University School of Law and Politics took a look at the use of profanity by US presidents and vice-presidents in the modern era. Beginning with a comment made by Woodrow Wilson in 1919 (which looks quaint by modern standards), the study identified 692 times when senior White House occupants and candidates used profanity in public statements. A

¹ Matthew 12:35-37.

² <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc5.Matt.xvi.html>

shocking 87% of those instances have been in the last ten years.³ What once was considered shameful, disgraceful, and demeaning in the context of governance is now being accepted as normal.

Sadly, the trend is also apparent in the language of children. As they hear adults swear more often and more publicly, and as they are inundated with coarse language on television, in movies, and out in the world, the language of young children is shocking. The age at which childlike innocence is being lost is getting younger and younger every day.

Now, let me be the first to say that I recognize the irony in this... that I am sounding a bit like a Pharisee in what I am saying. We are all caught up in this trend – not one of us is righteous, not one. But if we take Jesus at his word, isn't it pretty clear that we are all moving in the wrong direction here? If we are defiled by what comes out of our hearts and our mouths... if we will be held accountable for every empty word we say... every utterance that makes the world darker, meaner, angrier, and less tolerant... then we are all heading down the wrong path, are we not?

So, what should we do as people of faith? Perhaps we can start by trying to be more a little more like the turkey vulture. When we encounter something toxic, we can try our best not to pass it on. We can try our best to clean it up as best we can. When we hear others belittling or profaning another person, or another group of people, we can break the chain of negativity and make sure we do not pass it on. When we hear hate come out of someone else's mouth, we can refuse to let it pass through ours. When we hear public leaders speaking crudely, we can resist that strategy and demand something better from them, just as we demand something better from ourselves.

At the end of the day, this is not a difficult concept. It's pretty simple, really. *"Do you not see,"* Jesus says, *"that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles."* The words we use – the ones we listen to, and the ones we put out into the world – can make the world worse, or make the world better. The words we use can break down, or they can lift up.

As people of God, let's start with our words. Let's start climbing out of the sewer we are in... and start cleaning up our unsanctified hearts... one word at a time. **Amen.**

³ <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/law-politics/news/features/profanity-in-politics-behind-the-headlines>