

¹Now 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.”

I’ll start by getting one thing out of the way: if your takeaway from this gospel passage is that you don’t need to be concerned with proper hand washing, then you read it incorrectly. Wash your hands, people... frequently. We shouldn’t have any debate about that. So let me be clear on a second

matter: another incorrect reading of this text is thinking its point is “Christians are right and Jews are wrong.” That is definitely not an idea we should take from this text. The thought is way off base. The intended takeaway of this passage is about the human heart.

The scene is set when “some” of the disciples didn’t wash their hands according to custom. That also means that “some” of them did wash accordingly. That detail points to a reality of that day: a myriad of personal hygiene customs existed. The Hebrew scriptures do not contain rules or standards for everyone to follow. There are a couple of passages in Exodus about how priests should wash their hands before performing specific rituals, but that is the extent of what ancient law had to say about handwashing. However, various hand washing customs arose in Jewish communities. They had neither microscopes nor an understanding of microbial life, but time and observation taught them that individual hygiene practices benefited the community. For instance, imagine if a village had two types of field workers – one group picked olives and the other group shoveled manure – and at the end of the day they all returned home to eat with their families. For some reason, the families of the olive pickers were always fine, but the families of the manure handlers often got sick... except when a worker washed hands before joining the family for dinner. The community would piece together that people working certain jobs needed to have special rules in order to maintain the community’s health. Living in a community requires acting responsibly toward that community.

Now, how long do those workers need to wash up? Do they need to change garments as well? One village might set a different standard compared to the next village. One group may have felt that a certain type of basin worked best. Another village might have greater access to water, and therefore could afford washing more often. Another group might have strong opinions on how to dry the hands. Et cetera. Not everyone was going to follow the same customs on this stuff. That is the reality that plays out among Jesus’ disciples in today’s lesson.

These particular Pharisees and scribes advocate for their customs when they witness some of Jesus’ disciples not adhering to them. So they ask Jesus in an accusatory manner, “Why don’t your disciples wash up before eating?” Even though they overplay how common their customs are, they do have a point. What happens is that Jesus shifts the conversation to a weightier topic: the cleanliness of our hearts. [I like to think that he makes this shift while quietly handing moist

towelettes to his disciples.] By making this shift, Jesus implies that the motives of these particular religious leaders weren't entirely based on hygiene. It seems they were focused on exterior characteristics in an attempt to determine whether someone is in the right group or not. In this case, handwashing was the stated exterior characteristic. However, the unspoken complaint could have been about how these disciples dressed. How they spoke. How they made their income. Who their parents were or where they came from. It could have been based on the company these disciples keep, or who they love. Whether they say the right political catch phrases. You know... stuff only ancient people used to distinguish whether a person was in the right group or not. If it wasn't handwashing customs, they would have found something else to justify saying Jesus and his disciples don't fit into the right crowd. Being that these were religious leaders making these determinations, what can be inferred is that "the right crowd" means close proximity with God.

Jesus' point is that those outside appearances are not the root of who we are and they do not determine how God associates with us. The exterior stuff doesn't matter to God. What matters is what takes place in the heart. It's important to know that for the ancients, they understood "the human heart" as the place where decisions are made for how we conduct ourselves. So it appears that Jesus has stronger opinions about how we conduct our lives than how we wash our hands... go figure. Do we today ever use someone's exterior characteristics to determine if they are in the right group or not? Yes, we do that all the time, even if it occurs subconsciously. That doesn't mean we should write it off, though, because too often those determinations have a negative impact on someone who doesn't deserve it. For instance, I recently had a chat with my daughters about how people with facial scars or disfigurements aren't bad people. I forget what brought it up, but a conversation was warranted. Think about the shows – for children and for adults – that exhibit someone with a facial disfigurement: those characters are almost always the villain. Think of all the James Bond villains throughout the years. Think of the best Disney villain of all time... his name was literally "Scar." Whether it is facial disfigurement or another characteristic, we need to critique our prejudices as well as the messages we listen to. If we don't do that, it can lead to excluding people for no good reason. On the proactive side, we may need to seek out positive representations of people who too often are "othered" by society. That's one reason why I think all of us should be

watching the Paralympics right now. The other reason is that the Paralympics offer high-quality competition among world-class athletes.

The earliest Christians were known for their willingness to care for everyone, and they would accept everyone as they are, just as God does. It was scandalous, and it was rooted in God's grace. Whatever happened? I've shared this story with you before. When I was a teenager I met a retired Lutheran pastor, who had a passion in life for riding his Harley. He told me that not long before our conversation, he was scheduled to supply-preach one Sunday for a congregation. He rode there on his Harley and he parked in the church's parking lot. Before he could even fully dismount the bike, the usher team confronted him in the parking lot and said, "You're not welcome here. Get going." Upon hearing that, this pastor unzipped his leather jacket to reveal his clerical collar and replied, "Okay, but you're going to have to stand up there and explain to the people why you're the one preaching today." Then he started his bike again and rode off. I would have loved being a fly on the wall of the church that morning.

In our lesson, Jesus says the human heart can be a source for evil. He gives a list of examples: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. It's a wide range of acts. They differ significantly from one another. Yet, there is a thread between them all. Every single one of them is a willful act that results in the community being hurt. These acts put the self-interests of the individual above how that act will impact others. We will always have self-interests. If they go unexamined, they can hurt the community. Yet, if we examine our self-interests through the lens of God's welcome and grace, then our hearts will be open to what is best for our neighbor and community.

Jesus drives home the point today that our proximity to God is not determined by which outward customs we uphold, or how we dress, or who we associate with, or the passions and hobbies we have, or who we love, or our skin tones, or any scars or disabilities we have, or whatever mode of transportation we used to get to worship this morning. All of that stuff is exterior. God's proximity to us is determined by God alone. If you know you have prejudices on this matter, then ask the Holy Spirit to help you wash your hands of it. God chooses to be intimately close to us and

to people you and I may or may not like. Let's get on board with this scandalous grace of God that shapes the human heart. Amen.