

A Clean Heart
Matthew 15:1-10

Just about every time that Becky serves me a meal, she says, “Before you sit down, go wash your hands.” And so I do. My mother did the same thing to me when I was growing up. I’ve been washing my hands before every meal my whole life long, except for my bachelor years. Without a woman to tell me to wash my hands, I confess that I often forgot to do so.

Not to say that I don’t believe we should wash our hands before we eat. We should wash our hands regularly, throughout the day. Over the course of our lifetimes, we probably save ourselves several colds and maybe a bout or two with something more serious if we wash our hands regularly throughout the day.

It’s a good thing to do. Wash your hands before you eat is a good rule.

But it doesn’t have anything to do with the state of your salvation or the condition of your soul. I am grateful that neither my mother nor my wife has ever said to me, “Wash your hands before you eat, or else your soul will shrivel up and die, God will reject you, you will be cast into the fires of hell, and you will be expelled from society and treated like a pariah.”

I mean, rules are fine, but come on.

Generally speaking, I like rules. I write a weekly column in “The Source Weekly” called “Rules for Living.” I’ve been writing it almost two years now, nearly a hundred columns, sharing a different rule each week, and I’ve just barely scratched the surface. Rules are guidelines for having a happier, healthier life. Doesn’t everyone want a happy, healthy life? I do. That’s why I get excited when someone uncovers a new secret to a happier, healthier life. And I enjoy passing on to others the rules I have learned.

But, as good as rules are, some people blow them way out of proportion. That was the problem with the Pharisees.

Jesus was walking between villages with his disciples and a group of Pharisees who were on a fact-finding trip. They were following Jesus to see what all the furor he had created was about. As they passed a field of wheat, some of his disciples grabbed a handful of wheat from the plants and rubbed it in their hands to break down the grain. Then they ate it.

The Pharisees went ballistic. The disciples had eaten with unwashed hands. That was a violation of the Laws of God and was certain to bring down the wrath of God upon them. You could just see the Pharisees edging away from Jesus and the disciples as they waited for lightning from heaven to come down and strike them.

When nothing happened, they complained to Jesus about the irreverence of his disciples and their lack of respect for God and God’s laws.

Jesus answered them that God is far more concerned that people have a clean heart than that they have clean hands. The Pharisees demonstrated by their intolerance and condemnation of others that their hearts were unclean.

There are rules that will increase your chances of living a longer, healthier life. Wash your hands before you eat. Exercise daily. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables and cut down on fried foods, refined flour and sugar. Drink alcohol in moderation. Don't smoke or chew tobacco. Brush and floss after every meal. Wear your seatbelt. The list is nearly endless.

They are all good rules, and we should all practice them.

But these rules have little or nothing to do with the state of your salvation and the condition of your soul. And that is what God is more concerned about. You may have a clean, healthy lifestyle. But is your heart clean?

What good does it do to live a clean, healthy lifestyle, if we our insides are dirty?

What does a clean heart look like? A clean heart is free from negative, destructive thoughts about other people. A clean heart doesn't hold on to anger and resentment. A clean heart is honest and truthful, transparent, with nothing to hide. A clean heart cares too much about other people to misuse them selfishly. A clean heart shares the joys of others. A clean heart shares the sorrows of others. A clean heart enjoys lifting others up, not tearing them down. A clean heart does not reject or condemn.

It is far more important that we have clean hearts than that we have cleans hands. It is wonderful to have someone to say to us, "Wash your hands before you eat." But what we really need is someone to say to us, "Make sure you have a clean heart before you do or do anything."

Before you speak or act, make sure your heart is clean. Why are you saying what you are saying? Why are you doing what you are doing? Does it come from a clean heart? Or are your motives pure?

Each morning before we go out into the world, we need to examine the state of our hearts. What's going on in there? What kind of thoughts are we thinking? What kind of emotions are we feeling?

Throughout the day, we need to continue to check on our hearts. Uncleaness is contagious. When we are around people with unclean hearts, they can affect the condition of our hearts. When we are in difficult and stressful situations, our hearts can become unclean. We need to check on our hearts throughout the day.

At night, we need to present our heart before Gods for examination. We need to ask God to reveal our unclean thoughts and feelings.

If you don't think they are there, you are wrong. We may have a hard time recognizing them. Negative and destructive thoughts and feelings survive because they have a way of disguising themselves and hiding from us.

But God can see them clearly. If we ask, God will reveal them to us, one at a time. If God revealed them all to us at once, we would be so overwhelmed, we might be tempted to throw up our hands and give up. But God doesn't do that to us. God reveals them to us one at a time.

When God shows us an unclean thought or an unclean desire, or feeling, or motive, we are confronted with a decision. Do we want to hang on to it, or do we want to be free from it?

If you decide you want to be free from it, you have to do three things: First, name it. What is it? Is it resentment? Is it jealous? Is it fear? Is it lust? Is it addiction? What is this thing which is staining your soul? The first thing Jesus would do when he

encountered someone who was demon-possessed was to find out the name of the demon. The first step to casting out a demon is to name it. The first step is getting rid of a destructive thought or feeling is recognizing it and naming it.

Second, you have to make a commitment to work as hard as you can to get it out of your heart and your life. If you are not willing to make that commitment, it will not go away.

Third, you have to ask for God's help. No matter how hard you try, you cannot free yourself of unclean thoughts and feelings by yourself. You need God's help. And you need the help of the people that God will send your way to help you.

When we clean our hearts up, we will grow in love, joy, peace and all the other fruits of the Spirit. We will be able to draw closer to God and to have stronger, more fulfilling relationships with people.

Let this be our prayer, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

It's good to have clean hands. It's far better to have a clean heart.

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