

## Topic 8: Purity

Verses: Matthew 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23; Luke 11:37-41

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### Compare three accounts

	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Who interacted with Jesus	Some Pharisees and teachers of the law from Jerusalem	Some Pharisees and teachers of the law from Jerusalem	A Pharisee
How the confrontation started	Pharisees and teachers of the law asked why Jesus's disciples didn't wash their hands before eating, but Matthew didn't say they saw this happening.	Pharisees and teachers of the law saw that Jesus's disciples didn't wash their hands before eating, and so they asked a question.	A Pharisee invited Jesus to eat together. Jesus accepted the invitation. The Pharisee saw that Jesus didn't wash hands before eating, and then he asked a question.
Explained the tradition of the Jews about washing hands before eating	None	Yes	None
How Jesus responded to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law	Jesus replied with a question, and then cited Moses and Isaiah.	Jesus responded by citing Isaiah and Moses. The order is reversed.	Nether Moses nor Isaiah was cited by Jesus. Jesus made his point in his own words.
How Jesus talked to the crowd	Jesus called the crowd to him and said that what goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth defiles them.	Jesus called the crowd to him and said that nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.	Jesus didn't talk to the crowd
How Jesus's disciples responded	The disciples wondered whether Jesus had offended the Pharisees. And they didn't understand the parable.	The disciples didn't wonder whether Jesus had offended the Pharisees. They entered a house with Jesus and they didn't understand the parable.	Not mentioned
How Jesus responded to his disciples	Jesus asked, "Are you still so dull?" Then he explained what defilement is about to the disciples.	Jesus asked, "Are you so dull?" Then he explained what defilement is about to the disciples.	Not mentioned

## Jesus's attitude toward the Jewish tradition

- In Matthew 15: 3 Jesus invoked God to challenge the Jewish tradition: “Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?”
- In 15:6 Jesus repeated his objection: “you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.”
- In 15:16-19 Jesus made a pronouncement to challenge the Jewish purity tradition.
- In Mark 7:8 Jesus said, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”
- In 7:13 Jesus said, “You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.”
- In both Matthew and Markan accounts, Jesus cited Moses and Isaiah to attack the Jewish tradition. In Jesus's view, this tradition is opposed to the real Godly tradition handed down by the prophets.

## Form and setting

Some part of these passages is a **vice list**. In Matt, Jesus listed the sins of the Pharisees: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.” In Mark Jesus said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.”

Some part of these passages is a **parable**. In Matt Jesus said, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” In Mark Jesus said, “Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

The accounts in Matthew and Mark are **pronouncements**. There are two major components in a pronouncement story: the story that sets the stage and the authoritative statement made by Jesus at the end. Matt 15:1-15 is for setting the stage and 16-20 is the pronouncement. Mark 7:1-17 is for setting the stage and 18-20 is the concluding remark. Luke 11:37-38 is a brief background of the story whereas 39-41 is Jesus's pronouncement.

The setting of these stories might be that the early church and the Jews were at odds. Some Christians might wonder whether it was necessary to follow the Jewish ritual tradition. It seems that these stories were cited to break Christianity away from the Judaism, especially the Pharisee tradition.

## Cultural background

1) The tradition of the elders: Besides the written laws, the Pharisees also follow the **oral laws** of the Rabbinic tradition that were said to be given to Moses. There were two major functions

of this tradition: 1) To apply Torah's mandates to everyday life; 2) To build a fence around Torah to guard against any potential infringement (Strauss, 1996).

2) Ritual washing: Washing hands before eating was one of the most prominent of the oral traditions but it had no direct Biblical basis. Rather, it might be derived from Greek influence. It was the custom of the Jews to ritually **purify** themselves from any perceived defilement by contacting with Gentiles, whom they considered religiously defiled (Keener, 1993).

3) Corban: "Corban" is a technical term in Judaism, referring as to something dedicated, especially on oath. In Mark 7:11 what Jesus said implies that once the children had donated the amount they would have spent on their aged parents for religious functions, they were not responsible for their upkeep (Manser, 2009). Judaism demanded honor of parents and financial support of aged parents was a part of this honor. Some rabbis regarded this demand as the most important commandment in the Law. However, some religious people used this practice as a replacement of supporting their parents. And therefore Jesus used this example to criticize the **inconsistency of the Pharisees** (Keener, 1993).

4) Clean and unclean foods: In the Jewish tradition purity/profanity distinction is about **order and category**. Anything that is "out of place" or "out of order" is considered unclean. The realms of birds and animals contain both clean and unclean species. The clean could be eaten and the unclean could not. Within the clean group some animals or birds, such as sheep and pigeons, might also be sacrificed (Leviticus 11). This taxonomy corresponds to the classification among human beings. In Judaism humankind consists of two main groups, namely, Israel and the defiled Gentiles. One of the functions of the food laws was to remind Israel of her special status in the eyes of God (Wenham, 1996).

### **Sociological function of purity laws**

The purity laws constitute the general principle of classifying and structuring a society. Ancient Jews used purity rules to classify foods as clean or unclean, to rank objects based on degrees of uncleanness, and to identify people as fit or unfit to enter the Temple. Specifically, the purity laws determined the religious and sociological functions of the Israelite community. In the Temple, only clean animals and healthy animals that had no physical defect can be offered. Only a holy priest who is physically perfect and is in a state of purity can perform the sacrifice. Only Israelites that are not physically handicap can participate in the ceremony. In other words, the purity laws function as a tool for **social stratification** -- keeping some people or some things in and keep others out.

### **Sociological implications: Dos Jesus abrogate the Torah?**

The original intent of the purification rules is to make access to God easier, not close it off. However, the Pharisees turned it to the opposite direction, and as a result, some people were socially and religiously isolated. Jesus didn't condemn the tradition just because this was a human invention. Rather, what Jesus objected was the ritual practice without regard for the

true essence of the laws. In other words, Jesus did not try to abolish the tradition; he intended to **restore the true spirit of the tradition**. This attitude is in alignment with his six anti-theses in the Sermon of the Mount (Strauss, 1996).

### **Church situations**

Mark wrote the Gospel around the 50s and 60s in Rome when the Church was under Roman persecution. In AD 64 Nero started the first major persecution against Christians, blaming them for setting a fire in Rome. It is possible that Mark wanted to use the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees and how Jesus abolished the Jewish food laws to remind his fellow Christians that persecution was expected in Christian life, no matter whether the opposition was from the Romans or from the Pharisees. Thus, we had to **pay a high price to follow Jesus**.

Matthew was written around the 70s or 80s in Antioch. Scholars still debate on whether at that time Christianity had decisively broken away from Judaism, or it was still regarded as a sect of Judaism. Nevertheless, in both cases Christians might view themselves as the true people of God. Matthew might use this story to assert that Jesus' teaching represents the **true essence of God's commandants**.

Further, scholars agree that Matthew wrote the Gospel with a strong "**fulfillment thesis**," meaning that Jesus was portrayed as the one who fulfilled and consummated the Old Testament (France, 2007). This explains why Matthew cited Moses and Isaiah to argue against the Pharisees, but Luke didn't. When facing the challenge from the Jews, the early church might not want to brand their notions as completely new to overthrow the well-established Jewish tradition. By citing the **prophetic tradition** the arguments seemed to be more compelling.

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