

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew  
 SERMON: **When Hand Washing Gets Out of Hand**  
 SCRIPTURE: Matthew 15:1-20  
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus  
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It's flu season and people are paying a lot of attention to hand washing. Googled the words, "the importance of hand washing," and found 400,000 entries! I found articles on why it's important, how to do it, what happens if you don't, even how pastors can avoid getting sick by washing their hands after greeting parishioners at the door. One article was entitled simply, "*How do I wash my hands?*"

*The steps in proper hand washing are:*

1. *Wet hands with warm water*
2. *Use a clean bar or liquid soap (put the bar of soap on a rack to drain and dry)*
3. *Lather all over hands by scrubbing vigorously, creating friction, reaching all areas of the hands and wrists and counting to at least fifteen*
4. *Rinse hands*
5. *Dry hands with a paper towel*
6. *Use the paper towel to turn off the water taps*

There's more, but that should be sufficient to remind us of how obsessed some people are with hand washing. But today's hygienic police are rank amateurs on the subject compared to the religious police in Jesus' day! The opening paragraph in our Scripture text today introduces us to the topic, Matthew 15:1-2:

*Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"*

Alfred Edersheim in his classic, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, spends nearly four pages describing the hand washing rules and regulations of first-century Pharisees. Water jars were available at every meal. The minimum amount of water to be used was enough to fill one and a half egg shells. The water was first poured on both hands, held with the fingers pointed upward; and it must run down the arm as far as the wrist and then drop off, because the water was now itself unclean. The process was repeated with hands held downward. And finally each hand was cleansed by being rubbed with the fist of the other.

A strict Jew would do this before every meal and, in addition, between every course in every meal. The value of hand washing was held so high that one rabbi insisted that "whosoever has his abode in the land of Israel and eats his common food with rinsed hands may rest assured that he shall obtain eternal life." And a certain rabbi who was imprisoned and given a small ration of water used it to wash his hands before eating rather than to drink it, claiming he would rather die than transgress the tradition.<sup>i</sup>

Now believe it or not, this had almost nothing to do with good hygiene, because ancient people knew little about germs. It had everything to do with removing the ritual defilement caused by having touched something forbidden, like a Gentile, or something a Gentile had touched! Oh, I'm sure it had some hygienic benefit, but that was an accidental benefit of which they were largely unaware.

Now let's continue with our Scripture reading; in fact, let's start again at verse 1 and read through verse 20:

*Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"*

*Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:*

*"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*

*They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."*

*Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.' "*

*Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"*

*He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."*

*Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."*

*"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.' "*

### **Confrontation** (Matthew 15:1-3)

The chapter opens with the simple word, "then," but it doesn't tell us how much time has passed since the feeding of the 5,000 or Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee. I strongly suspect that news of those miracles, as well as of the amazing healings talked about at the very end of chapter 14, had made it back to Jerusalem. The religious leaders of Israel didn't normally bother much with backwater areas like Galilee. Like Kansas it was viewed by the elites as "flyover country."

But they decide that an official challenge must be made to Jesus before His popularity gets out of hand, so a delegation of ecclesiastical heavyweights is sent to Galilee.

The religious leaders of Israel are already open in their hostility to Jesus. In fact, for some time they have been plotting to kill Him (see 12:14). But Jesus is popular with the common people, so the Pharisees and other religious leaders know they have to tread carefully. At this stage they are still looking for ways to discredit Him rather than openly attack Him.

I think it helps to take a snapshot of first-century Judaism so we know exactly what we're dealing with. Judaism was in general a very legalistic religious faith, external and superficial. It could be practiced with great zeal and diligence no matter what the condition of the heart. The most hardened unbeliever could actually be a Jew in good standing so long as he kept certain rules and regulations, including tithing, of course. As long as someone gave generously to the synagogue, the rabbis were willing to overlook his heart condition. The focus was largely on covering up sin, not exposing and cleansing it, on appearing righteous, not being righteous.<sup>ii</sup> And political power was very much intertwined with religious faith.

These visiting religious leaders come to Jesus and ask, not for information but as an accusation, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" The fact that the charge is leveled against His disciples, rather than against Jesus Himself, is irrelevant. Since they are His disciples, Jesus is viewed as responsible for their behavior. In fact, as their teacher He is even more guilty than His disciples are.

**The religious leaders confront Jesus for violating their religious traditions.** The offense they target is a violation of the traditions of the elders, the long-standing, time-tested, universally-accepted views recorded in the Talmud and the Mishnah, the authoritative interpretations of the best minds of Judaism down through the centuries.

Now the fact that the religious leaders accuse Jesus of violating their traditions rather than the Scriptures themselves doesn't seem to embarrass them, because in a sense they actually consider their traditions to be superior to the Scripture. Their reasoning is not unlike those today who claim with one breath that the Scriptures are authoritative but then make it clear that the Church has the only infallible interpretation of the Scriptures. If the Church ever conflicts with Scripture, the nod is almost always given to the Church.

It's easy for us to spot these tendencies among our Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox friends, because they readily admit to accepting a dual religious authority—the Word and the Church. We evangelicals, however, have a harder time admitting that we are sometimes guilty of the same thing. We claim to have only one authority—the Word of God—but in practice, I fear, we sometimes cheat.

Some of you know the name of Marvin Rosenthal. Dr. Rosenthal was the founder of a ministry to Jewish Christians called *Friends of Israel* and the editor of a great magazine called *Israel My Glory*. He is a godly man, a fine biblical scholar, and a great evangelist. Nearly 20 years ago Dr. Rosenthal came to the conclusion through his study of prophecy that the Church would go through most of the Tribulation period, and he published a book entitled *The Pre-Wrath Rapture*

*of the Church.*

But he soon discovered that he was messing with the traditions of the elders. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American fundamentalism was almost exclusively pre-tribulational in its understanding of the time of the rapture. Many here in this audience have held that view, having been influenced by the Scofield Bible, Hal Lindsay's *Late Great Planet Earth*, and Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* Series. As with many ideas we grow up with, if they are never seriously challenged, we tend to treat them as absolute truth.

But I want to share my own personal conviction that there are no grounds for dogmatism on the time of the rapture. The Bible is simply not clear on the topic. That should be obvious when we see godly evangelical scholars holding at least four different and incompatible views on the subject—pre-trib, mid-trib, post-trib, and pre-wrath. True evangelicals don't have differing views on the deity of Christ or the virgin birth or the resurrection, but they do on the time of the rapture. That should be a hint to us that the pre-trib rapture falls into the category of a tradition of the elders rather than an explicit teaching of the Bible.

Please understand that by calling it a tradition, I'm not saying it is wrong. Many traditions are good and right; they just should not be held with the same dogmatism we attach to absolute truth. And we should not break fellowship with people over our traditions.

But that's what happened to Dr. Rosenthal. Though he was the founder and President of *Friends of Israel*, the governing Board fired him for questioning the pre-trib rapture! They didn't fire him because of any argument over exegesis or because his hermeneutics were inadequate or because of any clear doctrinal error—they fired him because he went against their tradition. I personally see little difference between what that board did to Dr. Rosenthal and what the Pharisees were doing to Jesus. Whenever our cherished views become more important to us than the Word of God itself, we are in trouble, and the church is in trouble!

We find in our story, however, that confrontation is a two-way street. The religious leaders confront Jesus, but then He confronts them.

**Jesus confronts the religious leaders for violating the commandments of God.** I find it curious that Jesus makes no attempt to defend the practice of His disciples; they need no defense. Rather He turns the tables on the Pharisees and teachers of the law by saying, "And why do *you* break the command of *God* for the sake of your tradition?" In other words, Jesus accuses them of a much more serious offense—violating one of the Ten Commandments and, in the process, actually nullifying the Word of God. Clearly Jesus is raising the ante. This is not some simple tit-for-tat argument He is making. They are deserving of condemnation.

**Condemnation** (15:4-9)

**Jesus accuses them of nullifying Scripture for the sake of their tradition.** To prove His point Jesus quotes the Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12). It's no accident that He introduces the commandment with the phrase, "For God said."

What God says is far more important than what the scribes and elders say. In fact, so serious is a violation of God's commandment that He Himself applies severe sanctions against violations of it. Jesus quotes Exodus 21:17: "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death."

That's what God says. What do the traditions of the elders say? Verse 5: "But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father' with it." What's going on here? Well, one of their traditions was that a person could dedicate his possessions to God by calling them *Korban* (this word actually comes from Mark's account of this confrontation). Any possessions thus dedicated could not be claimed by anyone else, not even by one's parents. OK, so far, so good. We might even agree with them. If you made a faith promise that you were going to give X amount of your income to God, I can understand why you would consider it illegitimate to use that money for anything else.

But the Pharisees had a trick up their sleeve. They taught that one could dedicate his possessions to the Lord when it was useful but then un-dedicate them when the crisis passed. If, for example, a Pharisee looked out his window and saw his aged and poverty-stricken mother coming up the walkway, evidently to ask for some food or for a loan, he could quickly declare everything he owned as *Korban*, dedicated to God.

Then when mom rang the doorbell, he would go to the door, greet her with warmth, and say, "What can I do for you, Mom." She would say, "Son, I just need \$50 to buy some groceries and to pay down my electric bill." And he would say, "Oh Mom, I would love to help you, but I can't. Everything I own has been dedicated to the Lord's service." And she would probably say, "Son, I understand. I would never want you to violate your oath to God. I can't believe God gave me such a generous son that he would dedicate everything he owns to the Lord! I'll go down to the Lord's Diner and see if they can help me." But as soon as the door was closed, the Pharisee would say, "Whew! That was a close call! Un-korban!"

Jesus says, "Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition." You violate His commandment with your tricks and traditions. You deny the truth by your way of life.

**Jesus accuses them of blatant hypocrisy.** Verse 7: "You hypocrites! You shysters!" Jesus always reserved His most blistering condemnation for those who practiced hypocrisy, pretending to be someone they are not. In another place He called them whitewashed tombs. No matter how much paint you put on a tomb, it's still a place of death. Then Jesus says,

*"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:*

*"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*

*They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."*

I don't think Jesus means that Isaiah's words were specifically and only a prophecy about the Pharisees. Isaiah was speaking about the religious leaders of his own day, but the Holy Spirit intended those same words for another day as well. And I think it would be hard for us to escape the fact that these same words are also for us today. How often do we honor the Lord with our

lips while our hearts are far from Him? Think about our musical worship. How often do we simply go through the motions, mouthing words while we're thinking about dinner or the stock market or a basketball game the night before? How often are we upset about a tune we don't like or the tempo or the volume at the very same time we are singing words like, "It's all about you, Jesus"? How many of our cherished viewpoints are little more than rules taught by men?

### **Application (15:10-20)**

Jesus is through with the religious leaders, for now. It's time to apply the truth to the lives of those who are salvageable. The Pharisees are not; they have committed the unpardonable sin, attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan (12:22-37); they are apostates; they are bent on killing Him. But there are two groups for which there is some hope—the crowd and the disciples—and Jesus turns to them.

**Jesus offers the crowd a universal principle: *Spiritual defilement is always internal, not external.*** (10-11) I assume the crowd in verse 10 has been witnessing this conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders from Jerusalem. So He uses the opportunity to teach them a very important and profound truth. He says, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'" This term "unclean" addressed a major issue for a first-century Jew. If you didn't stay "clean" by avoiding certain foods, avoiding certain people, and by keeping a long list of rules and regulations, you couldn't attend Temple, your friends would shun you, your business would decline as clients dropped you, and your reputation would suffer. Please try to grasp how absolutely revolutionary Jesus' words must have sounded to people who were taught all their lives that their eternal destiny hinged upon eating kosher food!

We don't use the term "unclean" this way today, but we have synonyms. We speak of someone as being unspiritual, ungodly, unholy, delinquent, or liberal (smile!). Whatever term we use, the point Jesus is making is that what goes into your mouth doesn't make you unspiritual. Eating with unwashed hands can make you sick, but it can't make you ungodly. Eating unsaturated fats and white flour and sugar can make you obese, but it can't make you unspiritual. Drinking wine, at least in moderation, can hurt your reputation in some circles, but it's can't hurt your standing with God. Chewing tobacco will turn your teeth yellow and make your breath stink, but it won't make you unholy. In other words, there may be good reasons for abstaining from all these things, but they are essentially irrelevant to one's spiritual condition.

Rather it's what comes out of a person's mouth—the words he speaks, the attitude he reveals, the hatred he expresses, the jealousy he shows—these are the things that defile a person and make him unspiritual.

But Jesus reserves His most detailed and pointed applications of truth for His disciples.

### **Jesus offers His disciples special insight. (12-20)**

**1. The spiritually blind cannot provide spiritual guidance.** Here's what seems to be happening. While Jesus is talking to the crowd, the disciples come up to Him and say, "Jesus, we've got a public relations problem here. Do you know you really rubbed the Pharisees the wrong way when you challenged them? Do you think you could tone it down a bit and be a bit more diplomatic? Otherwise we could be in some serious trouble."

Well, Jesus doesn't back down an inch. He *meant* to offend the Pharisees. Now He goes even further by telling His disciples, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." Plants not planted by the Father are representative of people who have not recognized Jesus as the Son of God. Everyone of them, He says, will be pulled up by the roots. Clearly this speaks of judgment and eternal condemnation.

Furthermore Jesus urges His disciples to quit worrying about what these religious leaders think. "Leave them. Ignore them. They are blind guides." The very metaphor is stunning. We have a couple of blind individuals in our church family. Sanford attends first service every Sunday with his delightful dog. Matthew attends second service using a cane. Neither of these men would volunteer as a guide to help people find their new classrooms. Both could offer you help with your computer, because God has given them unique skills in those areas, but they wouldn't try to serve as a guide.

Yet that is exactly what the Pharisees and teachers of the law are doing—offering themselves as spiritual guides when they don't have the foggiest idea where they are or where they're going. What a devastating description of those who prided themselves on their spiritual enlightenment! Jesus concludes, "If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." Another way to put the same thing is that if a spiritually dead person listens to a spiritually dead person for advice, both will end up in the pit, a metaphor, I believe, for hell.

Jesus' intention in these words seems rather obvious to us, but Peter doesn't get it, so he says to Jesus, "Explain the parable to us." Jesus isn't pleased by the request. "Are you still so dull?", He asks them all. Peter has asked the question, but there are apparently questioning looks on all the disciples' faces. So Jesus explains, "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?"

**2. Because food is physical, it can only affect the physical.** Eating food is simply a matter of biological processes: intake, mastication, digestion, elimination. It cannot possibly cause spiritual or moral pollution. Yes, there was a time when God established dietary restrictions on the Israelites. It was for their discipline, and for their health during a time when no refrigeration was possible and preservation of food was difficult. The restrictions also served to distinguish the Israelites from the pagans all around them.

Whatever the reasons for dietary restrictions, they were all removed when Jesus came and fulfilled the Law. Nothing is clearer in the NT than the fact that Christians can eat anything they want. In 1 Timothy 4 Paul describes certain false teachers who would invade the church,

abandoning the faith and following demonic teaching. He calls them hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They require people

*“ . . . to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”* (1 Timothy 4:1-5)

If you can thank God for it, you can eat it and enjoy it!<sup>iii</sup>

In 1 Cor. 10:25 the Apostle gives blanket permission regarding diet: “Eat anything that is sold in the meat market, without asking questions for conscience’ sake.” And in Colossians 2:16 he adds, “Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink.” Obviously we cannot keep people from judging us but we can reject that judgment as unwarranted and not coming from God.

In Matthew 15 we see that the words of Jesus fit perfectly with this liberated attitude toward diet. Diet doesn’t determine one’s spiritual standing with God. Food doesn’t defile. Rather what defiles, what makes people spiritual wrecks, is what comes out of their mouths, out of their hearts.

**3. Spiritual defilement is due to heart disease, not failure to wash one’s hands.** To make sure the disciples don’t misunderstand what He means, Jesus gives them a sample list of the kinds of things that defile: evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. Do you notice that he speaks of violations of the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> Commandments, in that order! Mark, in his account adds other items: greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, arrogance, and even folly (Mark 7:22). It’s these things, all launched by evil thoughts, that make a person “unclean” or unspiritual, NOT eating with hands that one has failed to wash ceremonially in just the right way!

**Conclusion:** What does God want us to take away from this profound dialogue? It’s so easy for us to think of hypocrites who are following an external, legalistic religious faith. We can even identify entire religions or denominations which we would characterize this way, perhaps justifiably. And there is some value in such observations. The more we understand the errors in other religions, the better equipped we will be to resist them and to rescue those caught in their webs.

However, I can’t help but think that God would rather have us look inside to see if we are nullifying the word of God for the sake of our traditions. Charles Spurgeon is reported to have asked his congregation facetiously, “If there were no Sunday morning service at eleven, how many of you would be Christians?”

Here at First Free, in the first service at least, we love the great hymns of the faith, robed choir, big organ, and quiet, thoughtful worship. Is that all biblical? Or is it just comfortable for us? Is it just our tradition? How well does it match the great 150<sup>th</sup> Psalm?

*Praise the LORD.*

*Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens.  
 Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.  
 Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre,  
 praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute,  
 praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.  
 Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.*

What if our next worship pastor were to incorporate sacred dance in one of our services? I'm not talking about every Sunday—just every once in a while. What if he started using clashing cymbals? Would we resist and nullify the word of God for the sake of our traditions?

What if your next senior pastor were to start preaching in khakis and a sport shirt? The habit of all your pastors for the past 58 years has been to wear a suit and tie. I'm quite comfortable with that and have no intention of changing. I've always thought of Ronald Reagan, who never went into the Oval Office without a coat and tie because of his respect for the office of President. I feel like I have a more sacred office than he, and that's why I dress as I do when I preach. But I recognize that there's nothing in the Bible that specifies how a pastor should dress. Suit and tie are just our tradition. What's in a pastor's heart is so much more important than what he's wearing that it doesn't even compare. I go back to my question: "Are we willing to nullify the word of God for the sake of our traditions?" I hope not.

One final application. Maybe there's someone here today who is spiritually blind, lost, unsure of where you're going when you die. I warn you not to seek out those who are also spiritually blind to help you find your way. Don't go to Dr. Phil or Oprah or self-help books or Scientology or Mormonism. Follow God's Word, which tells you plainly and simply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."

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i. John MacArthur, *Matthew 8-15*, 453.

ii. MacArthur, 452.

iii. In Romans 14:2ff Paul addresses the issue of vegetarianism vs. an unrestricted diet. He says, "*One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak eats only vegetables.* (Notice that the one who restricts his diet for spiritual reasons is the weaker brother!). *The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.*"