

# Lessons in Religious Liberty

## *Section 2 - Ritual Washings*

***Matt. 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23; Luke 11:37-41***

The men with Jesus were happy and free, and celebrated while others fasted. And they were different in yet another way: they ate their meals without being concerned about existing forms of purification. They ate bread with defiled, or unwashed, hands. It is assumed that this was their custom from the beginning. The subject does not appear to have become the object of criticism until a later period in the ministry of our Lord, at least in a way that caused the situations that were worthy enough to be mentioned in the Gospels. At the marriage in Cana, there were six stone waterpots on hand for the purposes of purification. Christ and His disciples were different from the other guests in that they did not pay much attention to ritual obligations. We can infer this from the reasons Christ used to defend the disciples' position when they were challenged on it. In essence, these reasons take the position that the habit of purification was not only lawful, but necessary. It was a positive duty which could never be neglected by those who desired to please God rather than men. But, in fact, it needs no proof that Jesus, who had such a serious and earnest spirit, could never have paid any attention to the insignificant regulations about washing before eating that had been invented by the elders.

These regulations were no small matter in the eyes of the Pharisees. Therefore, we are not surprised to learn that when Jesus and the Twelve treated them with indifference, these zealous religious leaders were provoked to the point of censuring them. This happened on at least two occasions, and these incidents are mentioned in the Gospel narratives. On one of these occasions, certain Pharisees and scribes saw some of His disciples eat without going through the customary ceremonial washings. So they came to Him and asked, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" In the other situation, Jesus Himself was the object of their censure. Luke tells the story: "...a Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him; and He went in, and reclined at table. And when the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed before the meal" (Luke 11:37-38). It is not stated whether the host expressed his surprise with words or with a certain look. But it was noticed by his Guest. This provided the occasion for exposing the sins of the pharisaic character. In holy zeal and true purity, the Accused (Jesus) said, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness.

You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also? But give that which is within as charity, and then all things are clean for you” (Luke 11:39-41). So Jesus offended the Pharisee and charged His irritated host, and the whole religious party he belonged to, with sacrificing inward for outward purity. At the same time, He taught the important truth that to the pure all things are pure. He also showed the way people could attain real inward purity, namely, by practicing that sadly neglected virtue: humility, or love.

The Lord’s reply in the other encounter with His pharisaic adversaries on the subject of washings was similar in principle but different in form. Without beating around the bush, He told the zealots in favor of purifications that they were guilty of the serious offense of sacrificing the commandments of God for the commandments of men, which were the pet traditions of the elders. The statement was not untrue. It was a simple, sad fact, though the truthfulness of the statement is not readily apparent. We hope to clarify this in the following comments. But before we proceed to that work, we must force ourselves (even if we are reluctant) to acquire a little better understanding of the practices which had become so despised. At one time, neglecting these practices seemed to be a detestable sin to the people who thought of themselves as being holy.

### ***Rabbinical Commands***

The goal of the rabbinical commands about washings was not physical cleanliness, but something that was considered to be far higher and more sacred. Their goal was to obtain, not physical, but ceremonial purity. That is, they wanted to cleanse the person from any impurity that may have been contracted when he had contact with a Gentile, or with a Jew who was in a ceremonially unclean state, or with an unclean animal, or with a dead body or any part of one. To these regulations in the law of Moses about uncleanness, the rabbis added a vast number of additional rules. It was nothing more than a self-willed commitment for having themselves and others follow the observance of the Mosaic precepts with exact precision. They issued their commandments with the pretext that they were necessary as the means by which they could reach the great goal of strictly fulfilling the commandments of God.

The burdens these scribes laid on people’s shoulders because of their reasoning were, in every respect, really very heavy. They were not content with the purifications prescribed in the law for uncleanness that was actually contracted. They went further and made provision for possible cases. If a man left his home to go to the market, he must wash his hands when he returned because it was possible that he might have touched some person or thing that was ceremonially unclean. It appears that the people also had to be very careful about the water that was used for purification; it had to be perfectly pure. It was even necessary to apply the water to the hands in a particular way in order to fulfill the command of the scribes. We do not have to go beyond Scripture to demonstrate to what ridiculous lengths these washings were carried. Mark supplies

us with specific information about the prevailing Jewish customs of purification. He makes an interesting comment and adds a touch of quiet satire: "...and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots" (Mark 7:4). To be brief, everything that was used in the preparation of food - in cooking it, or in placing it on the table - had to be washed. These washings, however, were not similar to the way people wash today - to remove actual impurities. Theirs were prescribed to deliver the people from the more serious uncleanness which they might have contracted since the pots and pans were last used. They may have touched some person or thing that was not technically clean. However, this kind and degree of purity that they strived for was not compatible with life in this world. The very air of heaven was not clean enough for these men who went too far in advocating these traditions which had been handed down from their fathers. There were other more real sources of contamination. But for them, the breeze had blown over Gentile lands into the sacred land of Judaism. On the way, it had contracted defilement which made it unfit to pass into their ritualistic lungs until it had been sifted by a respirator that possessed the magic power to cleanse it.

The extravagant fanatical zeal of the Jews in these matters is illustrated in the Talmud. Although the stories in it are from a later period in history, they may be regarded as a faithful reflection of the spirit which motivated and moved the Pharisees in the time of our Lord. Here is a sample of one of the stories: "Rabbi Akiba was thrown into prison by the Christians. Every day Rabbi Joshua brought him as much water as was necessary for washing and drinking. But on one occasion, it just so happened that the keeper of the prison got the water to take in to him, and he spilled half of it. Akiba saw that there was not enough water. Nevertheless, he said, 'Give me the water for my hands.' His brother replied, 'My master, you do not have enough to drink.' But Akiba responded, 'He who eats with unwashed hands commits a crime that ought to be punished with death. It is better for me to die of thirst than to transgress the traditions of my ancestors.'" Rabbi Akiba would rather break the sixth commandment ("Thou shalt not kill.") and be guilty of murdering himself than depart from the most insignificant rule of this make-believe ceremonialism. This illustrates the truth of the comment Christ made in His reply to the Pharisees. We will now proceed to consider His response.

### *Jesus' Defense of His Disciples*

As Jesus defended His disciples over the frivolous charge of neglecting the washing of their hands, it was not to be expected that He would show much respect for their accusers. It is not surprising, then, that we observe a vast difference between the tones of His reply in this case and that in His answer to John's disciples. Toward them, He displayed an attitude that was respectfully defensive and apologetic. Toward these religious leaders, He displayed an attitude that was offensive and condemning. Jesus had said to John's disciples, "Fasting is right for you; not to fast

is equally right for my disciples.” To the Pharisees, He gives a response which both condemns their conduct and justifies the behavior which they had challenged. They asked, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?” In response, Jesus asked them, “And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” It was as if He was saying, “It is not appropriate for you to judge - you, who see the imaginary speck in the eye of a brother, have a beam in your own.”

This spirited answer was something more than a quick, sharp reply. Using a question, it proclaimed a great principle: the careful observance of human traditions leads, without fail, to a corresponding negligence and corruption in reference to the eternal laws of God. Therefore, Christ’s defense of His disciples was essentially this: “I and my followers despise and neglect those customs because we desire to keep the moral law. To you, those washings may not seem to seriously conflict with the great matters of the law. They may seem to be, at worst, only small things - things that are insignificant. But this is not the case. What you do is treat small things as serious matters - as matters of conscience. This is degrading and demoralizing. No person can do that without being or becoming a moral idiot or a hypocrite. The moral idiot is incapable of discerning between what is vital in morals and what is not. The hypocrite is interested in working to get small things (such as washing the hands, or paying a tithe of herbs) accepted as important matters and as the truly great things of the law - justice, mercy, and faith. Then this type of person tries to quietly push these weightier matters aside as if they were of absolutely no importance whatsoever.”

The whole history of religion proves the truth of these statements. A time that is filled with ceremonies and traditions is, without fail, a morally corrupt time. Hypocrites are almost always fanatics. In secret, they are atheists. They are depraved people who get their revenge by living a scandalous life because they were forced to conform - outwardly - to practices for which they have no respect. They are priests like the sons of Eli - gluttonous, covetous, wanton. These are the black omens of an age in which ceremonies are everything, and godliness and virtue are nothing. Ritualistic practices and artificial duties of all kinds are to be renounced. It does not matter whether they originated with Jewish rabbis or with scholars in the Christian church. They are recommended by fanatics who advocate such practices, often sincerely. These people believe that the practices actually promote the culture of morality and piety. However, in the long run, they always prove that they are fatal to both. They are appropriately called “dead works” in the Epistle to the Hebrews. They are not only dead, but death-producing. For, like all dead things, they tend to decay and breed a spiritual disease that sweeps thousands of souls into eternal damnation. If they have any life at all, it is life feeding on death, the life of fungi growing on dead trees. If they have any beauty, it is the beauty of decay - autumn leaves that are dried up and yellow, when the sap is flowing down to the earth, and the woods that are about to pass

into their winter state of nakedness and desolation. Ritualism is, at best, the short-lived period after the summer of the spiritual year! It may be very fascinating, but when it comes, you can be sure that winter is at the door. "We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away" (Is. 64:6).

### ***The Fifth Commandment***

After Jesus brought a counter-charge against the Pharisees (that of sacrificing morality to ceremonies, the commandments of God to the traditions of men), He proceeded immediately to substantiate it by using a powerful example and a Scripture quotation. The example He selected had to do with avoiding the responsibilities which are contained in the fifth commandment. They tried to get out of the obligations by pretending to have a previous religious commitment. God said, "Honor your father and your mother." He attached the penalty of death to those who would violate the command. The Jewish scribes said, "Call a thing *Corban*, and you will be exempt from all obligation to give it away, even for the purpose of assisting needy parents." The word *Corban* in the Mosaic law signifies a gift or offering to God of any kind (bloody or bloodless) which is presented on any occasion, such as in the fulfillment of a vow (Numbers 6:13-14). In the language of the rabbis, it signified a thing that was devoted to sacred purposes. Therefore, it was not available for private or secular use. The traditional doctrine on the subject of Corban was dangerous in two ways. First, it encouraged people to make religion an excuse for neglecting morality. Secondly, it opened a wide door for fraud and hypocrisy. It taught that a person might not only make a vow to deny himself the use of things that were unlawful, but that he might, by devoting something to God, free himself from all obligation to give to others what would have been his responsibility to give to them if he had not made the vow. Then, according to the deadly system of the rabbis, it was not necessary to really give the thing to God in order to be free of the obligation to give it to another person. It was sufficient to *call* it Corban. Just pronounce that magic word over anything, and - presto! - it was pledged to God and, because it was sacred, others could not use it - nor could you. So this self-willed zeal for the honor of God led to the dishonoring of God by taking His name in vain. The practices which set the first table of the law (the first four commandments) against the second (commandments 5-10) eventually proved to be destructive to both tables. They made the whole law of God null and void by their traditions. They nullified the fifth commandment, and this was only a sample of the problems these zealots for the commandments of men had caused. This is implied in Christ's concluding words, "...and you do many such things like that" (Mark 7:13).

The Scripture quotation used by our Lord in replying to the Pharisees was just as effective as the example He used in pointing out their characteristic sins: hypocrisy and superstition. They were near to God with their mouth; they honored Him with their lips; but they were far from Him in their hearts. Their religion was all on the outside. They scrupulously washed their hands and

their cups but made no effort to cleanse their polluted souls. In the second place, their fear of God was taught by the precept of men. Human commandments and traditions were their guide in religion. They followed these blindly and didn't seem to care how far these commandments might lead them from the paths of righteousness and true godliness.

The prophetic word was quick, powerful, sharp, searching, and conclusive. Nothing more was needed to confound the Pharisees, and nothing more was said to them at this time. The sacred words of Jesus formed the appropriate conclusion for an argument against these keepers of tradition. And the argument was unanswerable. But Jesus had compassion on the poor multitude who were being misled to their ruin by their blind spiritual guides. Therefore, He took the opportunity to address those who stood around Him on the subject at hand. He used the short, pointed form of a proverb to speak to them: "Hear, and understand. Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man" (Matt. 15:10-11). This was a riddle that had to be solved, a secret of wisdom that needed to be searched out, a lesson in religion that had to be learned. Its meaning was clear but was probably understood by only a few people at the time. It was simply this: "Pay the most attention to the cleansing of the heart. Do not be like the Pharisees who pay attention to the cleansing of the hands. When the heart is pure, all is pure. When the heart is impure, all outward purification is worthless. The defilement that needs to be dreaded is not that which comes from meat that is ceremonially unclean, but that which springs from a carnal mind, the defilement of evil thoughts, evil passions, evil habits."

The words spoken to the bystanders became the subject of a subsequent conversation between Jesus and His disciples. He took the occasion to justify Himself for speaking those words and explained their meaning to the people. The Pharisees had heard the remarks and were naturally offended by them, because they tended to weaken their authority over the popular conscience. The Twelve observed their displeasure; perhaps they overheard their comments. Fearing bad consequences, they came and informed their Master, probably with a tone which implied a secret regret that Jesus had not been less outspoken. But irrespective of that, Jesus helped them understand that it was not a case for patience, compromise, or timid, time-serving, prudential policy. The tendency to be ritualistic was an evil plant which had to be uprooted, no matter what offense it caused its followers. In defending His straightforward manner of speaking, He pleaded His concern for the souls of the ignorant people whose guides the Pharisees claimed to be. "Let them alone? What would happen? Why, the blind leaders and those who are blindly led would fall together into the ditch. Therefore, if the leaders are so hopelessly joined to their errors that they cannot be turned away from them, let us at least try to save their comparatively ignorant victims."

### *True Defilement*

Jesus gave His disciples the explanation of the proverbial word spoken to the people. Peter had requested it (Matt. 15:17-20; Mark 7:18-23). It is plain and specific, because it is addressed to ignorant hearers. In the strongest possible language, it says over again that eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person, because nothing entering the mouth can come near the soul. The defilement that should be dreaded - the only defilement worth speaking about - is that of an evil, unrenewed heart, out of which proceed thoughts, words, and acts, which are offenses against the holy, pure law of God. The concluding words, "into his stomach, and is eliminated" (Mark 7:19), have a peculiar significance if we adopt the reading approved by the critics: "Thus He declared all foods clean." In that case, we have the evangelist giving his own opinion about the meaning of Christ's words, namely, that they had the impact of nullifying the ceremonial distinction between clean and unclean. It is a remarkable comment. It came from the man (Mark) to whom we are indebted for this report about Peter's preaching. In his disciple days, Peter had remembered the declaration. He had been the one who had the vision of the sheet coming down from heaven.

The evangelist gave us his comment. Now we may add ours. We observe that our Lord is silent here about the ceremonial law of Moses (the traditions of the elders were a supplement to it). He only speaks about the commandments of God, i.e., the precepts of the Ten Commandments. The fact is significant. It shows in what direction He had come to destroy, and in what to fulfill. Ceremonialism was to be abolished, and the eternal laws of morality were to become absolutely everything. People's consciences were to be delivered from the burden of outward positive ordinances, so that they could be free to serve the living God by keeping His Ten Commandments, which are summed up in the royal law of love (Rom. 13:8-10). It is the duty of the church to stand firm in the liberty Christ designed and purchased for her, and to be jealous when any human tradition comes into the picture to the point where it threatens her holy passion for God's divine will. God's people are to avoid superstition, on the one hand, and the licentious freedom of those who promote a godless liberty on the other. But they are not to do as the Pharisees wish them to do. Rather, they are to do what God requires of them. When His people think this way, they reject all human authority in religion and separate themselves from those who are devoted to tradition. At the same time, as God's servants, they reverence His word and His law, thereby putting a wide gulf between themselves and those who are lawless and disobedient, who side with movements of religious reform - not in order to get something better in the place of what is rejected, but to get rid of all restraint in matters human or divine.