

Create in Me a Clean Heart

Matthew 15:1–20

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The Stakes of the Moment

Our passage today is Matthew 15:1–20, and to understand what is happening here, we need to know where we are in the story.

Jesus' earthly ministry has gone on for about two and a half years, with roughly one year remaining before he enters Jerusalem that final time and takes up his cross. In those two and a half years, he has healed the blind, cleansed lepers, cast out demons, raised the dead, and preached with authority about the Kingdom of Heaven. He has called twelve unlikely men to follow him, turning fishermen and tax collectors into the future leaders of his new covenant community. He has walked on water, stilled storms, fed thousands with a boy's lunch, and declared himself Lord of the Sabbath. He has touched lepers, dined with sinners, discussed theology with a Samaritan woman, and commended the faith of Gentiles. In two and a half years, this unknown carpenter's son has become so popular that people are trying to make him king by force.

But not everyone liked Jesus. From the very beginning, the authoritative religious establishment of the day questioned, doubted, and accused him.

In Matthew 9:1–8, after Jesus heals a paralyzed man and forgives his sins, the scribes immediately accuse him of blasphemy in their hearts. The Pharisees question why Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners (9:10–13), and why his disciples do not fast (9:14). By the end of chapter 9, the first public charge is leveled: they accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the ruler of demons (9:32–34) — meaning that his works are the works of evil, not of God.

In Matthew 12:1–8, the religious rulers confront Jesus because his disciples are plucking grain on the Sabbath, then challenge him directly when he heals a man with a withered hand. After yet another healing, the Pharisees again accuse Jesus of operating by the power of Beelzebul (12:22–32). And near the end of that chapter, after everything Jesus has done, scribes and Pharisees come to him asking for a sign — revealing how thoroughly blind and deaf they have been to everything he has said and done. Jesus will give them one sign: the sign of Jonah, which is his death and resurrection. But even then, they will remain blind and deaf to him (12:38–42).

By the time we arrive at Matthew 15, all of these accusations and confrontations have been building toward something. And now it arrives.

The Formal Accusation

“Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.’” (Matthew 15:1–2)

The phrase “from Jerusalem” is a way of saying: the Feds have arrived. These Pharisees and scribes coming from Jerusalem signals that an official inquiry and investigation has been launched. This is no longer a local dispute. This is a formal legal case against Jesus.

Now, there is indeed a handwashing law in the Bible — Exodus 30:17–21 — but it applied only to priests when performing their religious duties. What the religious authorities had done was to take that priestly law and apply it universally, and then to further define and expand the laws of the Old Testament in such a way as to turn 613 commandments into some 4,200 regulations collectively known as “the tradition of the elders.”

But we need to be clear: this question being put to Jesus was never really about handwashing. It was about authority. The underlying question was this: *Do you and your disciples respect and submit to the authority of the Sanhedrin* — the Jewish religious and civil ruling body of the day? For Jesus to make his legal troubles disappear, all he needed to say was something as simple as, “I will make sure my disciples wash their hands before they eat.” That would have been enough. It would have demonstrated that Jesus respects their authority, and that is all they wanted.

But that is not what Jesus does.

Jesus Turns the Tables

“He answered them, ‘And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’” (Matthew 15:3)

In other words: it is not you who accuse me — it is I who accuse you. I am the one bringing a legal case here.

And Jesus states his case precisely.

“For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites!” (Matthew 15:4–7)

Jesus is not merely charging them with breaking a commandment of God — he is charging them with something worse: making the commandments of God *void*. The Greek word is *akyroo*, a legal term meaning to invalidate, to annul, to strip something of its binding force and authority. It is the word you would use in a courtroom to describe what happens when a contract is declared null and having no legal effect.

Here is what they had done. The religious authorities had taken two biblical laws — honor your father and mother (Exodus 20:12), and keep your vows (Numbers 30:2) — and played them against each other. A man with an aging parent in need could declare his assets *Corban*, a legal term meaning they have been pledged to God. Since the Bible prescribes no deadline for fulfilling such a vow, those assets could remain in his possession indefinitely — producing income for him, but legally off-limits for any other use, including the support of his own parents.

Imagine it this way. A man has a large and productive field. His aging father comes to him and says, “Son, could you help your old father a little from all that you have?” And the son replies, “Father, I can’t — everything I own, I’ve vowed to give to God. It’s Corban, it’s legally forbidden to you.” And then that son keeps the field his entire life — because a vow, after all, is something I will do tomorrow, and tomorrow has a way of never becoming today. And when that son dies, his family can void the vow entirely, keep what was “promised to God,” and the whole arrangement begins again with the next generation.

Do you see what has happened? The law commanding the keeping of vows is being used to nullify the law commanding the honoring of parents. They have not merely broken a commandment — they have constructed a legal system designed to make the commandments optional. That is what Jesus means by the word *void*.

And then he reaches for the prophet Isaiah to describe the spiritual condition behind all of it:

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Matthew 15:8–9)

The Pivot: What Really Defiles a Person

Now Jesus makes a critical move. On the surface, he has been responding to the Pharisees' question about handwashing. But in addressing that question, he identifies a far deeper issue — and he turns to address the crowd directly.

“Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” (Matthew 15:10–11)

The disciples come to Jesus privately and tell him that the Pharisees were offended by this. His response is measured and unsparing: “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” (Matthew 15:13–14)

Then Peter asks him to explain the parable, and Jesus does — with a note of gentle exasperation:

“Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.” (Matthew 15:16–20)

This passage exposes four problems, and we need to sit with each one.

Four Problems

First: Corrupt authority — tradition used to override the Word of God.

This is not simply an academic dispute about the fine print of Jewish law. What was happening in Jesus' day infects every religion, in every age. The religious authorities had taken the very words of the living God and through centuries of legal innovation — commentary upon commentary, tradition layered upon tradition — had gradually replaced the authority of God with the authority of men. And they had done this so thoroughly and so skillfully that they believed themselves to be more faithful to God than anyone around them. This is why what Jesus says is so devastating. He is not saying that they have broken the commandments. He is saying something worse: they have made the commandments void — legally annulled, stripped of binding force — while maintaining every appearance of extraordinary piety.

Second: Performative religion — external piety camouflaging inward corruption.

The word Jesus uses to describe them is *hypocrites*. It is a word from the Greek theater — literally, it means an actor. And what is an actor but someone who appears one way while in truth being something else entirely? An actor camouflages his true self and presents a different face to the audience. In the case of the Pharisees and scribes, the costume they were wearing was one of righteousness, piety, and purity. Jesus sees straight through it, into the corrupt and defiled nature of their hearts.

Third: The real source of defilement — the human heart itself.

And here Jesus is not making a narrow point about first-century Judaism. He is making a universal declaration about every human being who has ever drawn breath. Read that list again from verse 19: evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These behaviors do not come to us from the outside world pressing in on an otherwise neutral heart. They come *out of* the heart. They originate there. They are native to it. The heart is not a clean room that gets contaminated by exposure to a dirty world — the heart is itself the source of the contamination.

This is a deeply uncomfortable truth, because we spend enormous energy trying to locate the problem of human evil somewhere other than ourselves. We blame our upbringing, our environment, our culture, our circumstances. And to be fair, those things are real and they matter — they shape the particular forms our sin takes, and they can fan the flames of what is already present. But Jesus is saying that what is already present is the problem. No amount of handwashing reaches it.

Fourth: Religion cannot cure the heart.

This one is harder to see, but it is there. The traditions of the elders were built on the assumption that the more rigorous, more demanding, more elaborate the religious system, the more pure, holy, and righteous a person would become. Jesus destroys that assumption when he identifies true defilement as something that comes from *within* a person, not from without. If corruption came from the outside, then controlling the outside could change what is on the inside. And that idea — that we can transform the inside by managing the outside — is the great lie of religion understood as the works of man.

This does not mean that following the commands of God has no value. We know from experience that the externals of life — what we see, what we look at, who our friends are — deeply influence and impact us. These things can magnify and enhance the corrupt tendencies already present in the human heart. But they do not make the heart corrupt. The heart already is. The commands of God protect, guide, and shepherd the human heart, and they reveal its need for a Redeemer. But as important and as beautiful as the commands of God are, they cannot make the human heart righteous.

The Prayer the Heart Needs

This problem of the human heart is powerfully described by David in Psalm 51, written after his own grievous sin. David seeks forgiveness from God in that psalm, and he knows that God, according to his steadfast love and mercy, forgives him. But David recognizes that he has an even graver problem than the particular sins he has committed — the corrupt and twisted nature of his heart. “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,*” he confesses (Psalm 51:5). Being forgiven, as necessary and as precious as that is, is not enough. He needs something more. And so he prays: “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*” (Psalm 51:10)

It is the same prayer Paul prays in Romans 7: “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*” (Romans 7:24). And in the verses around it, Paul makes the same point Jesus has made here: the law is good and beautiful — he himself serves the law of God with his mind — but it does not change the iniquity or corrupt nature of the heart. With his flesh, he serves the law of sin. The law reveals the problem. It cannot solve it.

Our passage today exposes these problems with painful clarity. The real defilement is not on your hands — it is in your heart. And if that is true, then no amount of tradition, no amount of rule-keeping, no amount of external performance can reach the root of the disease. You cannot scrub the soul from the outside.

What God Has Promised

And that is why the Bible does not merely call us to try harder. The Bible promises something far more radical: God himself must give you a new heart.

Long before Jesus ever confronted the Pharisees, God had already promised what the law could never accomplish. Listen to this new-covenant promise from Ezekiel:

“*And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes...*” (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

Do you hear the grace in that? *I will... I will... I will.* God does not say, “Scrape away your corruption until you become clean.” He says, “I will remove the stone. I will give you a living heart. I will put My Spirit within you.”

And Jeremiah says the same thing: *“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”* (Jeremiah 31:33)

The Pharisees tried to write holiness on the outside — with rules, rituals, and tradition. But God says, in the new covenant, I write my law on the *inside*. I do not merely demand righteousness; I create it in a transformed heart.

So when Jesus says, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”* (Matthew 16:24–25), he is not saying, “Here is how you fix yourself — try harder to kill the bad parts.” He is saying: the old you must die, because only God can raise the new you. This is not self-improvement. This is death and resurrection. This is not the rehabilitation of the heart — it is the replacement of the heart.

And that is exactly what Jesus came to do. Within the year, the one standing before these accusers will go to a cross — not for his own corruption, but for ours. He will take the defilement that comes out of the human heart and bear it in his body unto death. He will bury it in a tomb. And on the third day he will walk out alive, so that everyone united to him by faith might walk in newness of life.

As Paul says: *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”* (2 Corinthians 5:17) Not a new costume. Not a new religious mask. Not a new set of rules to impress people. A new creation. A new heart. A new spirit. A new life.

The Invitation

So here is the invitation of the gospel this morning: stop trying to manage your defilement with spiritual cosmetics. Stop trying to keep the outside polished while the inside remains untouched. Bring your heart — your real heart — to Jesus Christ. Because the solution to the problem of the human heart is not a better tradition. It is a Savior.

Come to him honestly — no mask, no performance, no excuses. *Lord, here is what’s really in me.* Confess your sin plainly. Name it. Agree with God about it. Don’t defend it, don’t rename it, don’t minimize it. Turn to Christ in faith — not trusting your resolve, your discipline, or your religion, but trusting Jesus: his cross for your sin, his resurrection for your new life. Surrender control, open your hands, and yield your life to him: *Jesus, you are Lord. I’m not saving myself. I’m following you.* Ask for the new heart God promised. Pray Ezekiel 36: *Take out the heart of stone. Give me a heart of flesh. Put your Spirit within me.*

And remember this: the new heart is not a reward for your effort — it is a gift secured by his blood. What God promised in Ezekiel, he fulfilled at Calvary. *“He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.”* (Philippians 1:6) Rest in that.

If you don't know what to say, you can pray like this:

Lord Jesus, my heart is not clean. I confess my sin to you. I cannot fix myself from the outside in. I need mercy, and I need a new heart. I trust what you did for me on the cross, and I believe you rose again. Take my life. Be my Savior and my Lord. Put your Spirit within me, and make me new. Amen.