

### **What Makes Me Unclean, What Makes Me Clean?**

Air pollution causes significant health problems. In an attempt to deal with it, some people have purchased air purifiers to use in their homes. The only problem is, some air purifiers actually do more polluting than purifying! A recent study done by the National Science Foundation found that ionic air purifiers function by charging air particles that then “stick” to metal electrodes. So far, so good. Unfortunately, the process of ionization emits ozone. Ozone in the stratosphere is good; it blocks UV rays. At ground level, however, it goes by another name – smog! A single ionic air purifier can emit enough ozone in a house to trigger a level-2 smog alert!<sup>i</sup> In an honest attempt to fight pollution, some people are making it worse!

In Mark chapter 7, we find Jesus in another debate with the traditionalists of the religious community – the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They aren’t arguing over small potatoes either. This time it’s a seminal issue. To begin with, Mark helps us to see that the debate centers upon...

#### **I. Two Views of the Law.**

In the early verses of this chapter, Mark is helping his Roman audience understand the details of the debate. The Pharisees see Jesus and His disciples disobeying some of their traditional teachings; specifically, they were eating food with “unwashed” hands. Now, the Pharisees are not concerned about hygiene. They’re concerned about “spiritual” uncleanness. The *tradition of the elders* said that you were to do a ceremonial washing before you ate to symbolize your spiritual cleanness. Mark gives a textual note of explanation here. He says:

**When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.** (Mark 7:4)

Now, let’s be clear, these washings were NOT commanded by God! These were purely the commands of human Rabbis!

Jesus, in a sense then, is performing with His disciples a protest meal. He’s purposefully disobeying the “traditions of the elders.” Why? Because He wants to make it obvious which authority, which set of rules, He’s living His life by, namely, God’s rules, not man’s rules. When the Pharisees ask Him why He doesn’t observe the “traditions of the elders,” Jesus replies:

**...Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:**

**“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.”**

**You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.** (Mark 7:6-8)

Why is Jesus so upset? Here's why: the Pharisees in Jesus' day and Orthodox Jews today believe that God gave His law to Moses on Mount Sinai in two forms – one form was written, the other form was spoken or orally transmitted. They claim that both the written law and the oral law are fully divine. But, since the oral law (called the *Mishnah*) has more detail because it's been added to over the centuries, it is considered of greater importance than the written law. Rabbi Eleazer said, "He who expounds the Scriptures in opposition to the tradition (the oral law) has no share in the world to come." The Mishnah itself declares, "It is a greater offense to teach anything contrary to the voice of the Rabbis than to contradict Scripture itself."

A "greater offense"? Do you understand what is being claimed here? The Pharisees and the Rabbis are claiming that their teaching isn't just equal to God's, but actually it is a higher authority than God's Word! First of all, let's expose the glaring error: there was only one form of the Law given to Moses. Ex. 24:3-4:

**When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do." Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.**

So, the written form of the law is EVERYTHING the LORD had orally given to Moses. There aren't two forms of the law, just one and it is written!

Okay, so that's a clear lesson for Jews; does anybody see any applications of this to us Christians? Have you ever heard anybody say that human teaching is equal to God's Word? Our brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church are taught that church tradition, church authority is equal to Scriptural authority. They claim that Jesus gave authority to Peter to bind things on earth and that would bind things in heaven. Does that mean that Peter and all the other so-called "Peters" after him were being given the ability to write new laws?

Please consider this: immediately after Jesus said this to Peter, Peter tried "binding" something on earth. He said to Jesus that he would not allow Him to be killed. And what did Jesus do? He immediately exercised His authority OVER Peter. He called him "Satan," and said to him:

**...You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. (Matt. 16:23)**

Does that sound to you like Peter's word had equal authority with Jesus' word? No! God's Word is our highest authority. It always was and always will be the standard against which all other teaching must be judged. No human being, no matter how Christ-like he may be, has equal authority with Jesus Christ and His written Word. *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone is our authority!!

The two views about who has authority in this world that Jesus was combatting in His day are still alive today. Which side are you lining up with?

Next, Jesus takes on another crucial issue: The question of what makes us clean spiritually and what makes us unclean spiritually. First...

## **II. What Makes Us Unclean Spiritually?**

By implication, the Pharisees are accusing Jesus and the disciples of being "unclean" spiritually because of something they are doing with their bodies – they're eating without washing their hands. In verse 14, it says:

**Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean.” (Mark 7:14-15)**

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He’s taking the debate to a new level. It’s not just about who has the highest authority. That’s critical but it doesn’t explain our basic problem. The Pharisees could agree with Jesus about God’s authority being the highest and STILL be hypocrites. How? By just changing the sticks with which they tried to beat the people into submission. “Oh, we’re using the wrong stick? We’re supposed to use God’s stick? Okay, let’s go!!!” No, no, they’re missing the point. The purpose of the law isn’t to beat people into obedience. The law can’t make you obey. All it can do is show you what obedience is. The law never did and never will make anyone spiritually clean! It’s a mirror that shows you the dirt. It’s not the soap to cleanse you. The law is just a mirror!

And the law agrees with Jesus about what it is that causes us to get dirty. It’s not our environment. It’s not other people. It’s not the government. It’s not alien abduction. It’s nothing outside of us. It’s something inside of us. The dirt that ends up on the outside of us comes from inside of us. The prophet Jeremiah said:

**The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9)**

King David said:

**Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. (Ps. 51:5)**

This is what Jesus is trying to explain. We are not born good and “spoiled” by our environment or our parents or a poor diet. The most despicable evil, in seed form, is inside of us even before we are born – it’s there from the moment we are conceived! This is what Jesus was describing when He said:

**What comes out of a man is what makes him “unclean.” For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man “unclean.” (Mark 7:20-23)**

Do you see now why the “solutions” proposed by humanists today to rid the world of evil are a total failure? They’re trying to do what the Pharisees were doing: make people clean by changing what is outside of them.

“We’ll change their educational standing and this will make them ‘good, moral’ people.” But it was Harvard Business School graduates who triggered the Enron debacle several years ago. They had brilliant minds and dark hearts.

In the mid-60s when the War on Poverty began, only 6% of children were born out of wedlock. Out of genuine concern for those children, money was given to mothers who had been deserted by the father. But, over the next 50 years, the percent of children born out of wedlock didn’t decline; it rose from 6% to over 40%! We now know that, for children, the key to getting them out of poverty isn’t money, it’s marriage. Marriage drops the probability of child poverty by 82%. Rather than focusing on the “environmental” elements of child poverty, we should have been focusing on the parent’s marriage issues - the issues of the heart.

On the positive side, programs that DO deal with heart issues show amazingly positive results. Teen Challenge is a Christian drug-treatment program with centers around the country. There is a branch here in Hartford. Teen Challenge graduates have a 70% cure rate versus, at best, a 15% cure rate in secular treatment programs.<sup>ii</sup>

Prison inmates across the country who participate in Prison Fellowship's InnerChange Freedom Initiative program have drastically better numbers after release than non-participants. InnerChange inmates have a 26% lower re-arrest average, 35% lower re-conviction average and a 40% lower re-imprisonment average.<sup>iii</sup> Secular-humanist social engineering methods just don't work. Why not? Because they have a wrong diagnosis of the problem based on a wrong understanding of the nature of human beings. We are not naturally good. We are born sinners. The seed of evil is in every human heart at birth.

So, what can be done about it?

### **III. What Makes Us Clean Spiritually?**

In His concluding statement, Jesus makes a revolutionary announcement. William Barclay says that, when He said this, it was easily the most controversial thing He had ever said. Beginning at verse 18, Jesus says:

**“Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.”** And Mark makes clear the ramification of this statement with this editorial comment: **(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”)** (Mark 7:18, 19)

But Jews for centuries had been following the kosher eating laws that God had commanded them in the Old Testament. Some Jews had died rather than eat forbidden foods. Now, suddenly, that was all gone, canceled by Jesus? Why would He do that?

Jesus is not being spontaneous or capricious here. He's not “making things up as He goes.” Jesus is announcing a truth in its rightful time. The whole universe had been waiting for this moment! Now it was “the fullness of time” and Jesus turns the switch. Which switch is He turning? He turns off the physical dietary laws of the Old Testament and He turns on the spiritual dietary menus of His Kingdom. Were the old dietary laws wrong then, were they evil? No, no; they were right for a certain period of time. But now, they weren't needed.

I said before that the Old Testament Law was like a mirror, it showed us where the spiritual dirt was on us but it couldn't get the dirt off. Let me give you a different illustration for these food laws. They were like training wheels on a bicycle. Remember training wheels? What's their purpose? They keep the bike upright until you learn to balance on your own. That's what these dietary laws were meant to do. God was trying to help His people “get their balance” spiritually. He needed them to understand the nature of sin, that it was bad for them. It made them sick. Some of the prohibited foods actually COULD HAVE made the people sick. Pork can carry the larvae that causes trichinosis, a deadly disease. But Jesus' real point was this: *things* cannot be either unclean or clean in any real spiritual sense. Only *persons* can be spiritually defiled, and what defiles a person is his or her own actions, which are the product of his or her own heart.<sup>iv</sup>

So, as Jesus turns off the old dietary laws, He turns on, He activates, the new spiritual dietary menus, a smorgasbord of food for the soul, supplied by the Holy Spirit. The concept of being clean or unclean is not gone, it's being magnified, it's being put in its rightful context, not in the physical world but the spiritual world.

So, to answer the question, "What makes me clean?" we have to move from the physical world to the spiritual world, to the "heart of people" which is the symbolic spiritual center of us. The Jews were taught by God through the Law that they could not cleanse themselves from their sin. Cleansing was important but it was done ONLY in the Temple where everything was cleansed by blood. Only blood could make something "spiritually" clean in the O.T. With that in mind, now listen to the book of Hebrews' explanation of what Christ came to do:

**When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Heb. 9:11-14)**

Every person on earth needs this cleansing by Christ's blood because every person is born unclean. The blood of Jesus is the only substance that can do the job. Nothing else, no other religion, no other ritual, no other anything can cleanse you. How specifically do we obtain this cleansing? The apostle John makes it clear:

**If we claim to be without sin, (born good!) we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn. 1:8-9)**

The Greek word translated "purify" here is the same word Mark used when he said that Jesus declared all food "clean," spiritually "undefiled."

So, as you sit here today, in the sanctuary, in The Venue or wherever you are listening to me, are you spiritually clean? You can say "yes" only if you have confessed your sin to Jesus and told Him that your heart needs cleansing. Have you done that? If not, then you are not clean and if you are not clean then you are cut off from God's healing, God's blessings, God's protection and ultimately, God's presence. But you could become clean right here, right now. Right here, right now. This is your day! Let's do it, right now. Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Roy Britt, "Isn't It Ionic? Air Purifiers Make Smog," LiveScience.com (5-9-06)

<sup>ii</sup> As reported by The National Institute of Drug Abuse, part of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

<sup>iii</sup> As reported in a Baylor University study reported in the *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology*, [www.baylor.edu/mediacommunication](http://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunication)

<sup>iv</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 173