

“Cleansing Waters”

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The Third Sunday in Lent

When Israel was wandering in the desert wilderness of Sinai, their formational training ground for becoming the people of God, God called Moses up to the mountaintop to spend time alone with God for 40 days and 40 nights. During that encounter, Moses received the Law of God. He also received from God blueprints for creating a sanctuary where God would dwell with God’s people. That place of dwelling was called the “tabernacle,” or literally “the tent of meeting.”

Part of those building plans included this command:

“Make a bronze basin, with its bronze stand, for washing. Place it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it. Aaron and his sons are to wash their hands and feet with water from it. Whenever they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water so that they will not die. Also, when they approach the altar to minister by presenting a food offering to the Lord, they shall wash their hands and feet so that they will not die. This is to be a lasting ordinance for Aaron and his descendants for the generations to come.”

This bronze basin was made from highly polished looking glasses — mirrors the Israelite women brought with them from Egypt. They willingly offered them to God in thanksgiving for delivering them from their oppressors. When the priests approached the bronze basin, they were able to see their own reflection as they washed. The priest believed the reflection they saw was how they appeared to God, providing a moment to contemplate their readiness to enter into the presence of God and render their service to God. Did their face reflect the glory of God within them? Or, was the dirt on their face a sign of an impure will? Only the pure in heart could survive a face-to-face encounter with the radiant Holiness of God.

This was the Genesis of the establishment of purity codes within Judaism. The Hebrew word for purity means “shining” or “radiance.” The Hebrew word for impurity primarily refers to pollution, either as impure physical conditions or in the sense of culpability and moral transgression. Impurity included a diversity of conditions and behaviors, including besmirched items, repelling substances, body fluids, certain physical states and diseases, corpses and carcasses, contagion by contact, and avoiding certain foods. Both human and divine beings were thought to enjoy that which is whole, clean, and radiant, and to shun what is smelly, smeared, and smitten, especially when it threatened human life and order. This led to the development of a purity code by the Levitical priests, with ritual cleansing becoming the way of purification.

That is the backdrop for this encounter between some of the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem and Jesus. As we heard, they confronted Jesus, believing his disciples were in violation of the law. As they said, “the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders.” The scribes had a habit of taking ceremonial law meant for priests and Levites and placing it upon laypeople. In this case, they

take the Mosaic law directed at priests and mandated people ceremoniously cleanse their hands before a meal. In Jesus' day, it also included washing before morning prayers and at home before eating bread or matzah, as if those within the home were priests and the bread was an offering to God. Jesus responds by quoting the prophet Isaiah to remind them that the "traditions of the elders" are human constructs that have misconstrued God's commandments.

In no way was Jesus' nullifying the Law of Moses; he rejected how certain interpretations of the law, certain practices and rituals imposed upon people, obscured the intent of the law which was to safeguard purity of heart. This group of Pharisees and scribes, despite their expertise in the law and their utter devotion to obeying it, misunderstood what "being clean" means. That, at least, seems to be Jesus's assumption. Many Christians think that Jesus rejected all concern for purity — that purity was an old category that no longer pertained to his disciples. That's *not* what Jesus says. Jesus was as concerned with purity and defilement as the Pharisees were, and just as strict about avoiding defilement and maintaining and recovering purity. What's different isn't the role of purity, but its content. *What* defiles? For Jesus, it wasn't a matter of foods, bodily emissions, or touching dead bodies. Instead, it has to do with what flows out of the heart. Jesus makes it clear the defilements that should revolt us are the ones that come from *within* us.

We should be repelled by our own sin, using all our spiritual resources to allow the Holy Spirit to cleanse us from all our unrighteousness, which begins with taking a good look in the mirror and seeing what has tarnished our beautiful reflection. Cleansed from our unrighteousness, we experience a radical change of the heart because it is Jesus who neutralizes impurity's power. Think of his own ministry: He regularly touched the ceremonially unclean, and was a friend of tax gatherers and sinners, yet Jesus wasn't defiled. On the contrary, his touch cleansed and his presence purified. He has given us his Spirit that we can carry on his purifying mission.

The Pharisees thought defilement was a power, force, or contagion that threatened them from without. They put up their defenses, cleansed themselves obsessively, and avoided defiling people and circumstances, because there might be defilement around every corner. Those kind of pharisaical fears of impurity lead to a lifestyle of fear — fear of others — and a lifestyle of avoidance — avoidance of Gentiles, of less-than-pure Jews, of places and people and circumstances that might potentially defile us. Jesus didn't live in fear, and he calls us to follow him without fear into a world defiled by evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and slanderers, in order to reverse the flow of impurity. We're called to follow Jesus into our polluted world, bringing the message of the kingdom in the power of the Holy Spirit, who cleanses us from all unrighteousness.