Clean Hearts

(by Allen Dvorak)

We have become a nation of hand washers. Automatic hand sanitizers can be found now in many public places – airports, restaurants, restrooms, church buildings, etc. Many women carry hand sanitizing lotions in their purses for occasions when a place for washing the hands is not available. The flu bugs that make the rounds each year have probably contributed to this increased concern for hand sanitization.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were also quite concerned about hand washing, although for a different reason. The gospel writer Mark recorded that when the Pharisees and some scribes from Jerusalem observed the disciples of Jesus eating with unwashed hands they ***“found fault”*** (**7:1-12**). Mark explained to his Gentile readers that the Pharisees and *“all the Jews”* washed their hands in a special way, according to the tradition of the elders. The disciples had evidently failed to follow this tradition and thus the Pharisees and scribes considered them to be eating bread with defiled hands.

When these ritualistic hand-washers voiced their complaint about the disciples to Jesus, He didn’t defend the disciples or excuse their behavior as an *“oversight,”* but instead He attacked the practice of the Pharisees and scribes. Citing a statement from **Isaiah 29:13**, He identified them as hypocrites and observed that they taught ***“as doctrines the commandments of men”*** (**7:6-7**).

Jesus proceeded to give an example of how they had rejected the commandment of God so that they could keep their tradition. The Law of Moses had commanded certain responsibilities of children toward their parents, including financial support, but the Pharisees and scribes were following a tradition that allowed them to avoid such financial support.

They would declare the financial assets that might have been used to take care of their parents as *“Corban,”* i.e., dedicated by vow to God, and thus they were not *“allowed”* to use what was devoted to God for the support of their parents. God comes first, you know, and vows shouldn’t be broken! As Jesus noted, they had voided the commandment of God to provide for parents in their old age through their tradition. Although Jesus didn’t provide this detail, commentators suggest that those who made such a vow were allowed to use the *“dedicated”* possessions until their death, with the property then presumably passing to the temple treasury!

Wash, wash, wash! I am not entirely unsympathetic with the hand-sanitizing *“craze.”* I am a hand-washer from way back and I understand that people typically transfer germs through hand contact. But I also hope that, in my desire to avoid germs, I don’t become blind to the more important issue.

Jesus’ conversation with the hand washers had apparently taken place in the presence of a crowd of people. After Jesus had indicted the Pharisees and scribes for their hypocrisy, He explained to the multitude what really defiles a man. A man is not defiled by those things that enter him from outside, but rather by the things that come out of him (**7:15**).

The disciples of Jesus were evidently still puzzled about His comments and so they asked Him again about these things once they were away from the crowd (**7:17-23**). Jesus elaborated on His previous statements, noting that food doesn’t defile a man because it doesn’t enter his heart, but rather his stomach! A man can be defiled by what proceeds from his heart and Jesus listed some examples of such sin.

At least two conclusions stand out in this text. First, sin originates in the heart. As a result, we understand Jesus to have been speaking figuratively when He counseled the cutting off of the hand or foot that ***“causes one to sin”*** (**Matthew 18:8**). Sin may be committed with the hand, but it doesn’t have its source in the hand. James wrote that temptations work through the desires of the heart (**1:14**).

Second, the importance of the condition of one’s heart becomes obvious. The Pharisees and scribes were concerned with the cleanliness of their hands, but failed to see to the cleanliness of their hearts. On another occasion, Jesus criticized the Pharisees and scribes because they cleansed ***“the outside of the cup and dish,”*** that is, paid attention to their outward appearance, but failed to deal with the extortion and self-indulgence originating from their hearts (**Matthew 23:25-26**). ***“Blind Pharisee,”*** Jesus said, ***“first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.”***

In Jesus’ mountain sermon, He proclaimed the blessedness of those who are ***“pure in heart, for they shall see God”*** (**Matthew 5:8**). The word translated *“pure”* in this verse is the same word as that translated *“clean”* in **Matthew 23:26**. Those who are citizens of the Lord’s kingdom have *“clean”* hearts.

Clean hands will probably contribute to our physical health, but a pure heart is absolutely necessary for good spiritual health!