

# *Good News About Dirty Hands*

Luke 11:37-54

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 23, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>37</sup> While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. <sup>38</sup> The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. <sup>39</sup> Then the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. <sup>40</sup> You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? <sup>41</sup> So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.

<sup>42</sup> “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. <sup>43</sup> Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honor in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. <sup>44</sup> Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it.”

<sup>45</sup> One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too.” <sup>46</sup> And he said, “Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them. <sup>47</sup> Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. <sup>48</sup> So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs. <sup>49</sup> Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ <sup>50</sup> so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, <sup>51</sup> from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation. <sup>52</sup> Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.”

<sup>53</sup> When he went outside, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things, <sup>54</sup> lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say. (Luke 11:37-54, NRSV)

Have you ever been to a conference and heard a speaker that really got you thinking about things in a new way? Or maybe you watched a TED Talk online and the presenter left you wanting to read her book to learn more or, better yet, sit down over coffee with her and ask in person all those questions that are now running through your head?

That’s what’s going on here in the passage we just read. Jesus, the wisest and most captivating teacher who ever lived, is teaching the crowds and this Pharisee in the crowd finds himself fascinated by what he is hearing. Whether he agrees with Jesus’ teaching or not, he wants to press Jesus further so he invites him to a meal. The Greek word here suggests this isn’t a formal sit-down dinner. He invites him to lunch. “Let me buy you lunch at the taco truck, Jesus, so I ask you some questions about these things you’ve been saying all morning.”

Unfortunately, many of us have been left with a completely negative impression of Pharisees. That’s not entirely fair. Jesus actually had a great deal in common with these religious leaders. He worshipped with them every Sabbath day in the synagogue. He was often a guest in their homes for meals. In a way, these were his people, his community, his ‘church’ if you will.

Now Pharisees, of course, had a very specific agenda in ancient Israel. Their goal was to help their fellow Jews keep God’s law as best as they could so that Israel would be made holy and then God, in response, would deliver his people. In part it was a political agenda at a time when Israel was occupied by Rome. These Pharisees had great influence over Israel, as much as any other religious leaders. As the guardians of public morality, however, their own personal lives, when more closely examined, didn’t always reflect what they asked of others. The walk didn’t always match the talk.

All that being said, I believe this particular Pharisee is genuinely interested in hearing what it was Jesus had to say. So he invites Jesus to lunch. And Jesus quickly accepts the invitation because – I hope you know this by now – Jesus will eat lunch with anybody. You see, sometimes we mistakenly think that Jesus only came for the “least of these”, for the outcasts on the fringes of society. The lepers, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the refugees, the homeless, the abused, that’s who Jesus came for. And he did. He absolutely did! But Jesus



loves *all* people, which means he also came for the “greatest of these” as well, or for those who have imagined they are the “greatest of these.” If a greedy corporate executive billionaire, or a violent religious terrorist, or a racist white nationalist, or a crooked self-serving politician invites Jesus to lunch with a genuine interest in hearing what it is that Jesus has to say, I have no doubt that Jesus accepts the invitation. Unlike most of us, Jesus will eat lunch with literally anybody.

Just as they are sitting down to eat, however, the Pharisee notices that Jesus doesn’t wash his hands before digging in to his tacos. Uh oh! That brings back memories. Why is it that most kids hate washing their hands before dinner? I did when I was a kid. My kids did as well. They’d been playing in the dirt all afternoon, scratching the dog, scratching themselves, picking their noses, and they still don’t want to wash their hands before they touch their food. Soap is like kryptonite, especially for little boys.

But in Jesus’ case, this has nothing to do with personal hygiene. This is about ceremonial, or spiritual, purity. Before eating, scrupulous Jews like this Pharisee would have water poured over their hands to remove any spiritual defilement which may have been contracted out in the sinful world since the last time they washed. Washing instructions were specific. One and a half egg-shells full of water must be used. First the water must be poured over the hands beginning at the tips of the fingers and running down to the wrist. Then the palm of each hand must be cleansed by rubbing the fist of the other into it. Finally, water must be poured again over the hands, this time beginning at the wrist and running down to the fingertips.<sup>1</sup> And kids complain about rubbing a little soap between their hands for a few seconds under a running faucet!

You understand the thinking behind this, right? We become unclean in this world, spiritually unclean. That makes us unfit to present ourselves before God. So we need to clean ourselves up before we come into God’s presence. And there are things we can do, religious things, moral things, good things, that can make us right, or righteous before God. Ceremonial washing was one of those things in those days, along with a thousand other practices. In our day the list is nearly as long. Go to church on Sundays. Dress and speak and behave the right way when you do. That makes you more acceptable. Put something in the offering plate or in the paper cup of the homeless person on the street. Read your Bible every day. Don’t look at people in certain ways and with certain thoughts running across

your mind. Do your share of volunteer work. These sorts of things can go a long way to putting you right with God. That’s the idea here.

So when this Pharisee notices that Jesus makes no effort to make himself right with God, he is beside himself. The text says he was ‘amazed’, but this isn’t wonder. He is offended. Remember, his job, along with his fellow Pharisees, is to make certain that all of Israel was on its best behavior so that the Lord, in response, would see fit to bring his Kingdom. Though the Pharisee keeps his thoughts to himself, Jesus sees them clear as day. And what he sees first is that the outside of this man doesn’t match the inside. And when the outside doesn’t match the inside, well that’s always going to be a problem for Jesus.

The other day I picked up what I thought was going to be a ripe, delicious peach. It had the look and feel of a ripe, delicious peach and my mouth was watering as I went in to take the first bite. But appearances can be deceiving. It was rotten inside. I didn’t take a second bite. The biblical word for this sort of thing, a word Jesus often uses, is the word ‘hypocrite’. In those days it was a word taken from the world of theater, and it literally meant a ‘play actor’, one who gets on stage and pretends he or she is somebody he or she is not. It’s become clear to Jesus that it is a hypocrite who has invited him to lunch.

So speaking not only to his host but to others like him who must also have been there listening in, Jesus says, **“Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.”** If the outside of the peach looks ripe and delicious but the inside is rotten, the peach is rotten. It doesn’t matter what it looks like. If you put on appearances as somebody who is righteous and has it all together but inside you are anything but, you are anything but.

Doesn’t that give you pause? We all look good on Sunday morning. At first glance, we look like a basket full of fresh, ripe peaches. For the most part, we all say all the right things and do all the right things. But how is your heart? You present love and kindness to people around you. Is that how you really feel about them? Would you want others, even others here, to know the thoughts you have about them and the true motives and intentions of your heart?

You see, when Jesus says here that we are to **“give alms for those things that are within”**, he is essentially

<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series: The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1953), 158.

saying that we are to offer to God even the things of our hearts – our thoughts, our motives, our intentions – and then we will be made clean before God. It's not enough to just behave the right way. Our very hearts need to become right because even if nobody else can see past the exterior, God sees right past our words and our behavior and into our hearts.

Here's the thing. I think that we all want to become right. We all want to live with the assurance that from the perspective of heaven, the only perspective that ultimately counts for something, that we matter, that we are worth something, that we are worthy of being included, even that we are viewed as righteous. We want our lives to be validated, for others to look at us and say that we are people of value, good people. And if you are somebody who believes there is a God in heaven, you crave this validation from God more than from anybody else. Which one of us sitting here this morning wouldn't give everything we have to hear God say to us, face to face, "I am pleased with your life. I'm so happy with what I see."? So we scrub our lives as best as we can, strive to justify ourselves in a thousand ways, in hopes of hearing those words from others and ultimately from God. But in spite of it all, if we're honest with ourselves, the inside of the peach is still at least partly rotten. We all fall short in so many ways.

And here is what Jesus says to those who pursue some pathway or another of self-validation: **"Woe to you."** Six times he says it here. **"Woe to you."** This is not a vindictive word. Understand that. This isn't that spiteful, sweet-tasting word that you say to somebody you can't wait to see get what's coming to them. No, this is a bitter word. It's a word of grief and regret. Remember, Jesus will eat lunch with anybody because he loves everybody. He is heartbroken here that there would be some who would choose this rotten way of life.

You see, Jesus knows what we don't know. In an effort to validate yourself, you can try your whole life to do the right things and to get other people *to see you as somebody* who does the right things, but it is a burdensome and suffocating way to live. The results will either be, on the one hand, pride and self-righteousness as you trick yourself into believing you have succeeded or, on the other hand, guilt and shame when you realize that you have failed. And I am guessing that every last one of us here knows the crushing weight of this empty pursuit. How do you ever really know if you've washed up thoroughly enough or often enough? Right? Are you somebody this morning who is absolutely weary of trying to live up to something, in the eyes of yourself, others and God, somebody that you can never seem to be able to

make yourself become? If that's you, hold on. There is good news here. I promise you, there is good news.

Jesus continues: **"Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and [yet] neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others."**

Jesus grieves for people who give such meticulous care to so many religious duties and details but then disregard loving the people around them and seeking justice for those who are oppressed in our world. What does it matter if you check all the religious boxes you think you are supposed to check but then your heart isn't broken by the things in this world that break the heart of God? Doing right on the outside is not enough.

**"Woe to you,"** Jesus continues, **"For you love to have the seat of honor in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it."**

In those days the best seats in the synagogue were the ones up front facing the congregation where everybody else could look up at you and admire that you were as close to God as most people might ever hope to be. I've sat in those seats many times. I know how good that can feel, how addicting that pedestal can become. We all want others to look at us and think well of us, especially when it comes to our goodness and standing before God.

But if you are a person of influence among the people of God and your life, though appealing on the surface, is rotten on the inside, people are, without realizing it, following you down a path that leads to a dead end. Nobody can lead others to a place they, themselves, have not yet been. If your life is focused on seeking the attention of others (i.e. bringing glory to yourself) rather than lived in such a way to deflect attention past yourself to God that he might receive the glory, then your life is influencing others in a way that is of no help at all to them.

Do you see the essence of what Jesus is saying here? Let me try to make it as clear as I can make it. If you live your life trying to do the right things so that you can get others, especially God, to see you as somebody who does the right things, that is an absolutely dead way to live. That's Jesus' message here and it certainly came across loud and clear to those sitting around the lunch table that day, not only to the Pharisees but others as well. A lawyer, in fact, speaks up at one point

and says, “**Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too.**” Clearly, nobody is enjoying their tacos any longer.

Now when you read ‘lawyer’ here, don’t picture a defense attorney. This man was a scribe, one of a group of Jews in those days who, for many of the same reasons the Pharisees did their work, aimed to codify as much of Jewish law as they could. In other words, they would take the Torah, God’s law, and try to work out how it was to be applied in as many specific situations as they could imagine so that faithful Jews could then live rightly in every conceivable circumstance.

As an example, the Torah taught Israel that they were to honor the Sabbath, to rest every seventh day from their work, to stop creating and enjoy creation and the Creator. Sabbath is a beautiful gift given to us all to remind us that we are not slaves to our work, that our work does not validate us. The scribes of Jesus’ day, however, worked overtime to codify just exactly how the Sabbath was to be honored. They said, for example, that on the Sabbath a person could not carry a burden in his right or left hand, in her bosom or on her shoulder. That would be work. But, a person may carry a burden “on the back of his hand, or with his foot or with his mouth or with his elbow, or in his ear or in his hair, or in his wallet carried mouth downwards, or between his wallet and his shirt, or in the hem of his shirt, or in his shoe or in his sandal.”<sup>2</sup> And that’s just the instructions for carrying something on the Sabbath. Multiply that by all the other regulations for all the other possible circumstances in life and you begin to understand why this scribe was offended by the way Jesus was carrying on here! His life’s work was under attack when Jesus refused to wash his hands.

But Jesus’ message to him and those like him is the same as it was to the Pharisees. It’s a message of woe, a heart-breaking regret for the pathway they have chosen. **“Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them.”** You’re trying to validate yourself by doing all the right things in exactly all the right ways, and in doing so and encouraging others to do so, you are placing on yourself and others a crushing and suffocating burden that will never lead to life.

Jesus then follows up with this detailed bit about the scribes building tombs for prophets who were killed long ago by their ancestors. Not just some prophets,

but all the prophets A to Z! From Abel, the very first martyr, to Zechariah, the last prophet mentioned in the Hebrew ordering of the Old Testament. These religious leaders pay lip service to these long-dead prophets, but when new prophets come with the very same message, as Jesus himself is doing in this very moment, they begin to plot how they can murder them as well. In hindsight we know that Christ himself, along with nearly all of his apostles, were in fact murdered in the same way Abel and Zechariah were murdered. It’s always much, much easier to honor dead prophets than living ones! But when you publicly honor dead prophets, even if you hated everything about what they once stood for, you might get other people to see you as somebody who does the right things.

By now I hope you can see why it is that when Jesus speaks his last “woe” and then leaves the room, the Pharisees and scribes immediately join in their hostility towards him and plot together how they might do to him what their ancestors once did to Abel and Zechariah. It’s a perfectly natural response. Their whole lives were dedicated to validating themselves by doing the right things and getting others to see them as people who did the right things and when somebody attacks or threatens the very source of your validation, especially your validation before God, you are going to become immediately defensive, even violently defensive. It can happen today just like it happened back then.

But we must not make the same mistake. Remember that Luke is recording this incident years and years after it happened, recalling it to the church of his day as it is now recalled to the church of our day. We may not have formalized things as much as the Pharisees and the scribes formalized things in their day, but it is still our tendency to imagine that we can validate ourselves by doing the right things and by getting others to see us as people who do the right things. And it is still a suffocating way to live and to expect others to live. I mean, who here always does the right things? Who here is righteous in and of themselves, not in appearance only but through and through. In spite of appearances, are you confident that the deepest thoughts, motives and intentions of your heart have *earned you* validation before God? Not me.

But here is the good news. I’m glad you stuck around for it. This is the gospel. *Jesus didn’t wash his hands!* He didn’t forget to wash his hands. No, he deliberately, and in view of everybody who was there, refused to wash his hands. There was no part of him that came to this world to participate in and encourage, in any way, all the systems of self-validation we have set up for ourselves, even the ones, maybe *especially* the ones, that

<sup>2</sup> Sabbath 10:3. Cited by Leon Morris, *Luke*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (InterVarsity Press, 1974), 224.

are religious in nature. As the holy, righteous and eternal Son of God, Jesus is the only human being who has ever lived rightly – righteously! - on the outside and the inside as well. And yet he came to give his life, to suffer the humiliation and death of one marked as shamefully guilty in the eyes of God. In the end, therefore, what was rightfully ours was laid on him so that what was rightfully his could be laid on us.

Can you see it? When Jesus refused to wash his hands he was saying to us all that it doesn't matter how unclean your life has become in this world, and it certainly doesn't matter how others imagine how unclean your life has become. *You do not need to wash up before you come to God!* You can try, of course, but you will never be able to scrub long enough or deep enough to make yourself presentable. Only the blood of Christ, only the sacrifice he made for us all on the cross, has the power to make us clean. We don't have to clean ourselves up to come to God. We come to God, through Christ, so that he, by his grace, can make us clean. Woe to those who never come to be set free by this truth.

Some years ago when I lived in Omaha I had a neighbor named Dennis. We became friends and would chat often in his driveway or mine. He was older and been retired for some years so he had lots of time to chat. He knew I was a pastor and sometimes he's ask about the church. One day I told him I would be preaching that next Sunday. He expressed an interest in what I would be preaching about. So naturally, I invited him to come and join us in worship, to come and hear for himself. And immediately he declined, saying, "Oh no. I can't come. I don't have anything to wear. I only have one suit and it doesn't even fit me anymore."

His response made me laugh. Literally, I laughed out loud. I thought he was joking. But as soon as I did it became clear he wasn't joking. He really believed that he would not be welcome, either by the congregation or maybe even by God himself, if he showed up in church without a suit. And when I assured him that lots and lots of people came to worship in clothes far less formal than the ones he was wearing in that very moment, it didn't change his answer. It had been years, longer than he could remember, since he had been in a church. Even when he had a suit that fit he didn't come. And there was nothing I could say to him that day in the driveway that was going to convince him that he was welcome. Eventually, it became clear to me that it wasn't really about the suit. Something or somebody had convinced him along the way that he needed to clean himself before he came to God and, for whatever reason, he didn't feel like he was clean enough in that moment to come.

I remember how sad I was as I walked away from our conversation that day in the driveway. It broke my heart. It always does. How is it that we have been so deceived? God knows everything about us, sees deep into the hidden recesses of our hearts, deeper than even we could ever see, and in spite of all that God sees there he still loves us. He loves us enough to give his Son for us, to die for us. God sees you at your worst and yet loves you and is committed to you as much as anybody in this world loves you and is committed to you. If you had the best, most loving parents in the world, God loves you infinitely more than they did or do, and would sacrifice infinitely more for you than they ever would.

This isn't to minimize our sin and failure, or God's desire to see us transformed in every way that pleases him. But understand the order. We don't have to wash up before we come to Christ. We come as we are. And as we do, as we receive him in faith, as we trust him with not just our religion but with the deepest parts of our lives, then God in Christ begins to change us so that by his grace and for his glory we begin to live as he intended us to live. The gospel is not about what we are supposed to do. It's about what God, in Christ, has already done!

Are we a church that believes this? Are we? If we are church full of people that realizes that we do not have to wash up before coming to God, a community who has simply come to know the love and grace of Christ, freely given, we then become a church ready to make clear to anybody and everybody that they also don't have to wash up before coming to God. Now, if you come next Sunday to the Harvest Dinner, yes, I would appreciate it if you wash your hands before heading through the buffet line before me. But when you come to this Table, the Lord's Table, or when you come to prayer or to scripture, or when you come into God's presence here or anywhere, you do not have to make yourself clean before you come because you *cannot* make yourself clean. That's Jesus' job, and it's one that he has already completed. Remember, Jesus will eat lunch with anybody, anybody who is willing to eat with him.

So come. Come as you are.

Amen.

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## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Luke 11:37-54 again. There's a lot here. What part stands out to you? Why do you think you were meant to notice that part first?
2. Jesus doesn't wash his hands before lunch. Why is the Pharisee offended by this? Can you think of a contemporary example of this today, where somebody might similarly be offended?
3. Jesus is often described as 'meek and mild'. Does he seem meek and mild here to you? What is the significance of how Jesus is presented here in this scene?
4. Of the six 'woes' directed here to the Pharisees and the scribes, which one has your name on it? Which one hits close to home for you? Why?
5. Why do people like Jeff's friend feel they can't come to church as they are? What is it that leads people to this place in life, to this view of God?
6. Do you feel you can come to God *today exactly as you are* without making any effort to clean yourself up before you come? Why or why not?
7. Anne Lamott writes, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us." What do you think she means? Do you agree?
8. How do we ever become clean? That is, how do we ever live the sorts of lives we inherently know we were made to live?

#### **Table to Table Question**

#### ***A question for kids and adults to answer together***

When God looks at your life, exactly as it is right now, what do you think he says?