

“Cleanliness is Godliness”

Luke 11:37-44

Louis Pasteur is credited with discovering the connection between microbes and disease along about 1850. His name became universally known when his process for heating liquids to kill bacteria was named Pasteur-ization!

Like other pioneering researchers of the past, Pasteur’s theories were mostly rejected by his contemporaries. In 1872 Pierre Pouchet, Professor of Physiology at Toulouse, made the statement; “Louis Pasteur’s theory of germs is ridiculous fiction”. Today, we know Professor Pouchet’s ideas were ridiculous fiction. Pasteur’s understanding of the connection between cleanliness and disease brought amazing advances in health and medicine.

There’s an old proverb; “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” There are many people who, when asked for the source of this saying, reference the Bible. But these words are not in the Holy Scriptures. Yet there is a connection between the two. In fact, I am convinced of this linkage to the degree that I would say, “Cleanliness is Godliness.”

Not sure about that? Well, keep listening as we open the Word of God to Luke chapter 11 and verses 37 to 44. Listen carefully as I read this text and show you from the words of Jesus, that “Cleanliness is Godliness.” **Luke 11:37-44.**

The words of Jesus in this text relate several AREAS of inner cleansing that teach us how “Cleanliness is Godliness.”

The First AREA is,

Spiritual Cleansing

As we begin let’s look briefly at the setting. Jesus is teaching and a Pharisee in the crowd requested that He come to his house for a meal. The Greek word is *ariston*, the word used for a late breakfast, or the first meal of the day. This meal was normally served after returning from morning prayers at the synagogue. So Jesus was probably teaching in the synagogue just prior to this invitation being given.

In light of Jesus’ teaching, it is important for us to know the three distinctions the Pharisees used to identify themselves. (1) They were not to make use nor to partake of anything

that had not been tithed; (2) to observe the laws of purification; and, as a consequence of these two, (3) to abstain from familiar interaction with all non-Pharisees. This separation formed the ground of their distinction. Notice it is exactly to these three things our Lord refers: so these sayings of His are not, as they might seem to us, unconnected or random, but in the strictest internal relationship.

So Jesus accepted the invitation, accompanied the Pharisee to his house, and reclined at the table in preparation for being served. It is at this point that Jesus made a choice that astonished his host and created the backdrop for His teaching.

What astonished the host was the fact that Jesus did not wash his hands before reclining at the table. He was not expecting Jesus to neglect something that all rabbis and religious leaders taught as important! We have no record that he said anything about his surprise, but immediately Jesus begins to teach him, and the other guests, how **cleanliness is godliness**.

Jesus knew how important these ritual washings of cup and platter were to the Pharisees; but they were not scriptural commands. In Matthew 15 the Jewish leaders confronted Jesus with the failure of His disciples to wash their hands before eating; thus breaking the tradition of the elders. In that same text, Jesus contrasted the tradition of the elders with the commandments of God. This is an important distinction because the two were not synonymous.

The traditions of the elders focused on outward, ritual or ceremonial purity. The commandments of God focused on the heart; on inward or spiritual purity. Jesus reminded those in the room that they were cleansing (present tense) the outside of the cup and platter, while their hearts were being filled (present tense) with greed and maliciousness.

Many Pharisees were wealthy and, some at least, accumulated that wealth by questionable means. In Mark chapter 7 Jesus accused them of creating a religious shell-game in order to avoid keeping the command to honor father and mother. Funds that were to be used to care for their aging parents were “labeled” as Corban; a gift dedicated to God. But there was no mechanism for insuring that the funds actually were used for that purpose. They could be spent selfishly. Again, the traditions of the elders nullified the commandments of God.

Jesus also said they were filled with wickedness, or maliciousness. A malicious person is one who has deep seated animosity toward another individual or a group of people. Most Pharisees looked down on anyone who did not follow their rules and laws. They exercised their

maliciousness by casting out of the synagogue anyone who refused to follow their man-made rules. That's what happened to the blind man in John chapter 9.

Jesus called His audience fools. Not exactly the kind of language that endears you to people. He reminded them that the inside and outside were parts of the same whole. He instructed them to begin NOW to give alms of the things they already had; i.e. the things in the cups and the platters. If they would do that, all things would become clean.

Now you might say "How can the inside become clean simply by giving alms of what they had? That sounds like a works-based salvation." My response is - don't divorce these words from the larger context.

IF... they would've given alms of the things they had, it would've signified a heart of compassion. A heart of genuine compassion is only possible when spiritual cleansing has taken place. Remember Zacchaeus? He promised to restore four-fold anything that he had taken dishonestly, even to half of his possessions (and he was very wealthy). Jesus responded by saying: "This day salvation has come to this house..." Zacchaeus' changed heart prompted him to generosity and restitution.

Let me make this perfectly clear; there can be no godliness without spiritual cleansing! There can be good works, there can be philanthropy; but without godliness these are motivated by selfish desires. The Pharisee who hosted Jesus considered himself to be clean; but Jesus said his heart was filled with greed and wickedness. He was focusing on the condition of the outside while Jesus was focusing on the condition of the inside.

What about you my friend? Have you been cleansed on the inside? Or are you more concerned with looking good on the outside; with making a good impression among your peers? Which concerns you more, what others think of you or what God thinks of you? There is only one way to acquire godliness. It is through the merits of the shed blood of Jesus Christ for your sin. If you have never surrendered your life to Christ, your heart is not cleansed. It doesn't matter how good the outside looks. God is not impressed with your good works. He will say to you on the Day of Judgment; "Depart from me, I never knew you."

Jesus pointed out in these verses that a changed heart will result in changed actions. Those changed actions are proof of a changed heart. Spiritual cleansing is the first area of cleansing that makes godliness possible.

The Second AREA is,

Moral Cleansing

In verse 42, Jesus pronounces the first of three woes on the Pharisees. The Greek word is *ouai*; a word that is essentially a sound. Some English words like this are pop, splash, bang, etc.

The word *ouai* is translated as woe or alas. It is an interjection, a term of grief or denunciation. In Revelation 18:16 to 19 we read how the merchants and shipmasters who have gotten rich by trading with Babylon will lament to fall of the city with the words, *ouai, ouai* – “alas, alas, that great city...”

And why did Jesus pronounce woe on the Pharisees? Verse 42 tells us they failed to make moral distinctions. They zealously kept the traditions of the elders in minute detail; they were tithing the smallest garden herbs. But they were disregarding the commandments – justice and the love of God. They would have been familiar with the words of Malachi 6:8; “*He has showed you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you; to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*”

Tithing was part of the Law. It was instituted to provide for the needs of the priests and the Levites, and additionally, for the care of widows, orphans, and the poor. Giving of the tithe was to be a reminder to the people that everything they had came from God. As they reflected on His generous blessings, they were to generously bless others. But the Pharisees were anything but generous. Pride, arrogance and self-assertion became the hallmarks of their clique.

Judgment, or justice, refers to the ability to make moral distinctions; to be able to discern between right and wrong. The Pharisees slavish devotion to the traditions of the elders blinded them morally. Earlier in this chapter Jesus said; “*If your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness.*” The Pharisees could no longer distinguish between right and wrong.

They claimed to love God and be zealous for Him; but their claim was false. The healing of the lame man in John chapter five is an example of their misplaced zeal. Instead of rejoicing that a son of Abraham had been released from bondage, they griped about him carrying his mat on the Sabbath! But they took their livestock to the watering trough on that same day. You see how warped and twisted their judgment was?

In verse 42 Jesus is restating the two greatest commandments: love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. The Pharisees did neither.

In Christmas Carol Kauffman's book, "Light From Heaven," Bennett Armstrong was a man who did and said all the right things in public. He looked good on the outside and was respected by the people in his church. But at home his wife, Annie, and oldest son, Joseph, suffered greatly. Bennett was a bitter, angry man who had more concern for his sick horse than for his wife's heart condition! By God's grace Annie raised Joseph and his 2 siblings to respect their father and love the Lord. She truly demonstrated justice and the love of God.

Now, what about you and me? Are we careful to observe the outward trappings of religion while neglecting justice and the love of God? We'd probably be quick to say "No." But perhaps we should take some time to think before we speak. Remember, the requirements of discipleship are cross-bearing and daily death to self. That's greater than what was required under the Law of Moses. That law dealt primarily with actions, the law of Christ deals primarily with attitudes and motivations of the heart.

What do you do when someone in your church fellowship is treated unjustly? Do you try to secure justice and reconciliation, or do you ignore it because it might imperil your reputation or your position? Do I claim to love God and yet rejoice when a brother or sister is caught in sin? That's what the Pharisees did. Their air of moral superiority prevented them from seeing their need for moral cleansing. Let's not make the same mistake!

The Final AREA is,

Social Cleansing

The final two 'woes' that Jesus pronounces on the Pharisees have to do with their social interactions; how they related to the people among whom they lived and worshiped. They expected to be greeted in the marketplace with the title of Rabbi. It tickled their ears and fed their spiritual pride. It fed their perception of themselves as superior to the common people and prevented them from social interaction with non-Pharisees. They perceived themselves as spiritually, morally, and socially superior to those around them. They were a proud and haughty group of men.

When they went to the synagogue, they expected to be seated in a prominent location where everyone who came in could see them. A.T. Robertson tells us there was a semi-circular

bench at the front of the room that faced the congregation. Seated here, they would be clearly visible to all. According to what Jesus said it was a much sought after place of honor.

Yet in spite of their airs of superiority, Jesus said they were hypocrites. That is, they gave the impression they were holy when they really were not. In fact, their condition was so bad that Jesus said they were like unmarked graves. Men would walk over these graves and become unclean without even knowing it.

So not only were the Pharisees themselves unclean, but their pseudo-spirituality prevented others from seeing their uncleanness. One commentary had this comment; “the plausible exterior of the Pharisees kept people from perceiving the pollution they contracted from coming in contact with such corrupt characters.” Wow, that’s a mouthful!

Can the same be said about you and me? Are people better or worse spiritually from having had contact with us? That is a serious and probing question. Do they sense an attitude of spiritual superiority in our words and actions? Or do they sense a genuine acceptance and appreciation of their gifts and abilities?

Are there people you refuse to associate with because someone warned you, “I wouldn’t touch that situation with a ten foot pole”? Do you fear that associating with them will cause others to reject you? Are their neighbors or acquaintances you try to avoid in public places?

Do you only invite into your home those of certain social status, or those who can return the favor of hospitality? If we do these things we will receive the same condemnation as the Pharisees; the condemnation of hypocrites!

Jesus’ message in this text is clear; cleanliness is godliness! It starts with spiritual cleansing, an understanding that the heart is desperately wicked and in need of cleansing by the blood of Christ. No amount of washing or ritual or outward form can make us acceptable with God. Only when our hearts are cleansed by the blood of Christ can we be clean in His sight.

When that cleansing takes place we are equipped to make moral decisions. The Holy Spirit of God in us enables us to understand and practice justice; and the knowledge of how much we’ve been forgiven motivates us to share the love of God with others.

As we make those moral judgments with the mind of Christ in us, we see people for what they are; unique individuals made in God’s image. People Christ died for. When we exhibit that kind of love in our social interactions, others will understand that – “Cleanliness is Godliness.”

