

Sermon: Would the disciples use hand sanitiser?

Reading: Matthew 15:1-20

Introduction

In the light of what we have been experiencing in recent months with Covid 19, which seems to have fostered much fear and confusion within government, scientific circles, for individuals and families who are concerned about what is the best and safest way to do things.

Shops and other public buildings now require masks to be worn and usually have a bottle of hand sanitiser at the entrance, likewise churches have also had to offer sanitising stations. How quickly we have adopted these new requirements and have a high expect action that anyone who wants to come into our churches will also adhere to these rules.

You may be wondering what this has to do with our reading today? Chapter 15 opens up with the Pharisees and teachers of the law coming up to Jesus and complaining to Jesus about the disciples who are not washing their hands! Jesus response as always is worthy of paying careful attention as His words still speak into our situation today.

Context

To set context, chapter 14 ends with Jesus crossing over the stormy lake with His disciples after rescuing Peter who had stepped out onto the waters but once doubt crept into his heart he lost focus on Jesus and began to sink. When Jesus pulling him out of the stormy waters they both climbed into the boat and the Scriptures tell us, suddenly the wind died down and waters became calm.

It seems Jesus allows the storms to come our way until His purposes have been fulfilled. Jesus wanted His disciples to be sure of His identity and this early morning boat trip to a solitary place was anything but a quiet day away from it all. By the end of the day, the disciples were left in no shadow of doubt as to who Jesus is. 'Then those who were in the boat worshipped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God" (**Matthew 14:33**).

Chapter 15 opens with some Pharisees and teachers of the law who have heard about this amazing miracle worker, so they have travelled from Jerusalem to see for themselves and determine if He is a fraudster and charlatan.

Sadly when the Pharisees speak to Jesus the first thing they do is offer criticism. There is just no pleasing some people! They confront Jesus about His disciples who, '... don't wash their hands before they eat?' (**Matthew 15:1**).

Its almost humorous, we have the greatest healer in all of creation where no illness, demon or disease is more powerful than He.

Every disease is dispelled,
Every demon expelled and
Every illness cancelled
And all the people marvelled.

Yet the Pharisees criticised Him as they were too busy being offended to recognise whom they were speaking to. To be clear this is not a hygiene issue which upset the Pharisees, this was about breaking the traditions of the elders. How dry and mechanical religiosity can be without a heart circumcised with love for God. Jesus has healed everyone who came to Him teaching the people about the kingdom of God but the Pharisees concern was about ritual and tradition.

When tradition and preferences trumps the heart of worship of God we have a dead religion with no power. Its like saying I will only come to church if I can sing! Jesus says, 'These people honour me with their lips but their hearts are from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules **(Matt 15:8-9)**.

Paul puts it this way saying these people, 'Having a form of godliness but denying its power' **(2 Tim 3:5)**. It's a dead and worthless tradition that has no life nor power. Its lip service and personal preference, not personal commitment and obedience to God.

Paul has some harsh words to say to those who are more concerned with their own preferences and desires of tradition over the desire for God and His requirements. I will let you read the rest of **2 Timothy 3:5**, be prepared for a shock. So to be clear, this is not a hygienic issue but a particular ritual of cleansing before eating which fulfilled the traditions of the elders.

How well do we listen to God's word?

As the Pharisees and teachers of the law have been critical of the disciples for not obeying the hand washing ceremonies Jesus calls the crowds to come to listen to what He has to say. He urges the crowd to be attentive to what He says. How many times does Jesus tell people, 'If you have ears to hear, then listen?' Which gives the impression we are not as good at listening as we may think we are!

Consider how many times have we sat in a church service and listened to a sermon and 5 minutes later we not able to remember anything about it?

We can do the same reading our bibles in our daily devotional time. We can read out of habit and not engaging our brain. A good tip is to ask ourselves the questions what was that speaking about today? What did I learn or what has challenged me or encouraged me etc? May we be disciples of Jesus who are attentive to His words and to His voice and not falling into set patterns of dead and lifeless traditions and habits even if these are our preferences, as we can become complacent and not think about what we are doing in worship.

Task - Re-read the passage again

Read over the passage again from verse 10 to verse 20 and see if you can spot the words which are repeated. This is something worth looking out for in Scripture and helps us to be attentive as we read. When a word is repeated in scripture it is worth taking notice of it because its important. In the ten verses from our reading today, Jesus mentioned defile 5 times? So what does defile mean? To defile is to make something dirty, impure, unclean or spoiled

it's not just biology

Jesus says its not what goes into a persons mouth that defiles them but what comes out of their mouth which defiles. Out of the mouth will come what the heart is filled up with. That is a scary thought indeed. If we took more notice of this we would probably be much wiser and speak less as the mouth will speak of what the heart is filled.

Now before anyone objects saying we know cleanliness is important and we have to be careful what we eat and drink, making sure food and utensils are prepared and cleaned appropriately. But this is not what Jesus is referring to, thats why He tells people to listen carefully. Jesus connects defilement directly to a spiritual sense. It's not how clean our pots and pans are on the outside but what is in the inside which matters. Likewise it's not how respectable we look or dress, for this is only fashion, outward appearance may

impress the world, however it's the inward attitude of the heart which impresses God. What is in the heart is what concerns God.

To be clear Jesus focusses the attention on the human heart. Wrong attitudes to others, anger, malice, deceit, lies, jealousy, coyness all originate in the desires of the heart. Jeremiah was right when he said, 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure, who can understand it' (**Jer 17:9**)? Confession and repentance is the remedy for the deceitful heart.

Spiritual biology

As a church and disciples of Jesus should we not be as much concerned for the spiritual health of our churches when it comes to matters of the heart as much as we are about the physical health of our churches using hand sanitises and wearing face masks?

Our focus can sometimes be in the wrong places as we become overly concerned as the Pharisees did. Focussing in on traditions and rituals and ignoring the ways of God and reinterpreting the laws of God for our own advantage (**see Matt 15:6**). This is more damaging and detrimental to our health and well being not just in the short term but eternally.

We need to be careful what we nurture in the heart, as we can justify any behaviour or attitude and deceive ourselves thinking we are right. This can happen to any of us at any time, this is why we should watch over each other in love and challenge behaviour which is wrong in the church when its against God's word. Once we begin to justify our behaviour when it goes against Scripture we are in danger of usurping the authority of Scripture (God's word), and making God out to be a liar when we justify our behaviour as acceptable even declare it good (**see 1 Cor 5:1**). When we do this the truth is not within us any longer, (**see 1 John 1:8**).

Wolfgang Musculus on Christian righteousness writes, 'Truth must be suppressed because men are wicked and blind'. This is the very point Jesus was making. The Pharisees were being hypocritical and were blinded by their own desires and sadly they were also misleading others to follow their reprehensible behaviour as righteous. We cannot and should suppress the truth even if it offends!

Consider the list Jesus offers, this is by no means an exhaustive list, but it is a list we must take notice of. Jesus says, for out of the heart come.....

Evil thoughts - Unholy, ungodly thoughts of mischief and mayhem

Murder - Bitterness, envy, jealousy and hatred of another leads to murder in the heart

Adultery - either physical or only desires of sexual acts with another person not spouse

Sexual immorality - Sexual unions outside of marriage & not permitted in biblical laws

Theft - Could even be borrowing and not paying back as well as blatant theft

False testimony - speaking against your neighbour to side with friends and family

Slander - Gossip certainly falls into this category

Does Jesus' list offend?

We live in a very easily offended culture which wants to silence anyone from speaking out against its ways. Our culture busies itself with promoting tolerance and respect of others and their lifestyles until we present an alternative perspective and discover quickly this view is not to be tolerated but labeled offensive, bigoted, hateful or offensive.

The Pharisees were being hypocritical and Jesus speaking is like a two edged sword and cuts deep. The disciples said to Jesus do you know the Pharisees were offended when you said these things (**Matt 15:12**). The word of God is indeed a double edged sword (**Heb**

4:12; Rev 1:16), truth can bring either life or death. Jesus intention was not to offend the Pharisees nor to hurt or punish but to bring about healing by showing the hypocrisy of their thinking in order to bring them to repentance by seeing the truth. Preaching does one of two things, it will either bring about a conviction in the spirit which leads to confession and repentance or silence the preacher by any means possible! (**Luke 4:29**).

Vaccine for virus

Culturally sensitive churches are becoming immunised, not with a vaccine against a virus but against sin. Sin no longer offends our sensitivities as it once did because little by little just like a vaccine works we have become familiar to the sin and no longer feel the effects of it as acutely as we once did. Once we begin to desensitise ourselves to sin it becomes tolerated and the next step is accepting of it. I am not speaking here of those outside of the church as Paul reminds us otherwise we would have to leave this world (**1 Cor 5:10**), however we should have greater accountability and higher standards within the church otherwise we are no different to the world and set no example to them who are perishing.

Take the list Jesus provides for us in this passage and consider how many of these are still offensive to the Christian and agree these should not be found acceptable within the church but should be repented of.....

Wicked thoughts - many struggle to control wandering thoughts which can take us into wicked places. We are to take all our thoughts captive under the control of the Holy Spirit through confession and bringing them before God (**2 Cor 10:5**). Entertaining them can give birth to sin and sin leads to death. (see **James 1:15**). An obvious example of the outward defilement would be coarse jokes and stories.

Murder - Jesus raised the standard from the 10 commandment not to the actual crime of murder but even to the hatred we may hold in our hearts towards another person and said, even if someone hates another have murdered them in their heart (see **1 John 3:15**)

Slander and false testimony - definition can be to defame, character assassination and gossip all fall into this category. Do we keep company with gossips? Do we indulge in gossip against others? Proverbs says, '...a gossip separates close friends' (**Prov 16:28**), Its destructive and gossipers are under God's wrath according to Paul (**Rom 1:29-32**).

Adultery and Sexual immorality - Ever heard anyone say something like this, 'You cant help who you fall in love with they are only acting on how they feel?' or 'Our heart wants what it wants and that can't be wrong!' 'They are being true to themselves and are so loving together'. 'Love is a gift from God and love is pure, God is love and where love is then God is also there also!' We can justify almost anything when we want to when it feels right - however remember its not about feelings or matter of heart as this is deceitful!

Summary

As a church should we not be concerned with the authority of Scripture for our lives? As Christians and the Church of Jesus Christ, we are to desire a heart that is pleasing to God, not simply follow the traditions and ways of the word which makes us no different. We are not perfect people nor should we claim to be but we must at least strive for Scriptural holiness for this is what Methodism was raised by the Holy Spirit to do in this nation. Once we lose our distinctiveness what is left to distinguish us from the world around us? Nothing! Don't become too concerned with hand sanitisers at the expense of the heart faults. To end with a quote from Wycliffe who said, 'The truth shall prevail' not ritual, tradition or even the hand sanitiser, but truth in righteousness. **Amen**