

CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS

Leviticus 8-27

Romans 14:13-18

Living God's Word—A Walk Through The Bible

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Some of us may have grown up hearing the saying, "Cleanliness is next to godliness." The value that a good person will follow the etiquette of keeping themselves bathed, with clothes that are neat and clean. The value that someone dirty and unkempt is often not looked at with the same respect as someone who is clean and nicely dressed.

I remember as a child how we always needed to take our bath on Saturday night and then wear our nicest "church clothes" to church on Sunday morning. The value and expectation was that people needed to be presentable going to worship and Sunday school; people needed to be clean in body and clothing to take Holy Communion, and to see the pastor.

It has been a difficult transition, as many of you know, as these unwritten traditions have changed and are continuing to change. I remember as a teenager in the 60's how shocking it was when some people began to wear jeans and t-shirts to church. There were some who felt like the church was totally going down the tubes.

Then when women started wearing pants rather than dresses; when some men started wearing casual shirts and not ties; when some men started having long hair; when some came to church with wrinkled clothes or ragged tennis shoes, there were some who felt that God himself was being desecrated. Some felt it took away from the dignity of the church.

Even today you can ask yourself why you dress the way you do when you come to church? What voice or conscience speaks to you about how you think people should look? Do you feel uncomfortable if someone disheveled, with messy clothes or hands, with tattoos, piercings or different colors of hair sits next to you?

As we delve into the Old Testament book of Leviticus we read many chapters and verses about foods that are clean and unclean. We read about countless ways that they were to cleanse themselves from skin diseases and mildew. These Bible people also had regulations for women who had recently given birth about how to deal with exposed blood.

Some scholars have explained that the reason all these laws came into being was to actually protect these people from illness, death and infectious diseases. In fact, these Leviticus laws were kind of like the health department today telling us to wash our hands often with soap; to stay out of public places if we are vulnerable to the flu virus; to not cough on others; to use sterilized latex gloves if you may come in contact with exposed blood.

In Old Testament times, of course, they didn't have the understanding of medicine we have today. They didn't know about how bacteria works or how infectious diseases spread. They didn't know why eating certain foods would make them sick.

My mother grew up as a missionary's daughter in Madagascar. I remember how she always was concerned that meat like pork and chicken were cooked extra well. She had seen people get sick and die from terrible illnesses that sometimes came when the impurities were not cooked out of the meat. That is also why the Jewish people were often forbidden to eat meat from certain animals.

Therefore God gave them many commands and laws to help them survive and remain strong. In a time when the child mortality rate was high, when most adults did not live to be very old, God tried to protect this relatively small group of people by restricting them from eating certain things. He commanded them to wash their food and themselves in certain rituals that were very thorough.

Yet what happened as the years went on was that these laws on cleansing became more and more a part of their worship rituals. And over the generations these laws became not as much for health reasons as a way to identify who was a faithful follower of God. Following these rituals to the letter meant for the religious leaders that this person was then pure and acceptable to God.

As a result when we get to the New Testament times we see a continual struggle over these food and cleansing issues. In fact, we see the Apostle Paul in Romans 14:13-17, addressing how some people felt certain food is unclean, while he is *"convinced that no food is unclean in itself."* (v.14)

The truth that Paul trusted in was that through Jesus Christ the old laws and rituals were over. Paul taught that Jesus is the fulfillment of these laws and that following them does not automatically make us right with God. It is by faith in Jesus, and only by faith in Jesus, that we are made right with God; it is only by faith that we have the promises of eternal life.

Jesus himself in Matthew 23 also deals with this issue. In this passage Jesus is attacking the religious leaders, the Scribes and Pharisees who follow all these Old Testament laws—by that time there were 613 laws they were to follow exactly to the letter. Read Matthew 23:25-28...

Jesus reveals that simply following laws and rituals, wearing fancy robes or acting like one has it all together means absolutely nothing in revealing who that person really is. What really matters is what's on the inside. What really matters is if a person's heart and soul is cleansed by faith in the blood and forgiveness of Jesus.

That brings us to today and the discussion I opened this sermon with. Again, what influences from your past, from your church upbringing influence your impressions of people today? How often do you find yourself judging people—judging whether they are good people, whether they are Christians, whether they are lost spiritually—simply by how they look?

It is extremely easy to think that those who look a certain way; who talk like they know everything; who can quote some Bible verses or theology; who have been involved in certain things in a church that they are really close to God. It is so easy to think that those who follow certain church rituals, who wear fancy robes, who are really religious are automatically going to heaven.

Yet Jesus is telling us to not be deceived by these outward things or church traditions. What matters the most is what is on the inside in one's heart. What matters is if one's heart has been washed clean in the gracious forgiveness of Jesus. What matters most is if one's heart and thereby life has been changed and renewed by the love of Jesus.

It is amazing how often, even in the church, we proclaim our belief in one thing, and yet in our actions and words we do just the opposite. How often we say we truly love others yet we let our jealousy or anger dictate what we do? How often we say we believe in the forgiveness of Jesus yet we in turn won't forgive someone else? How often we say we follow Jesus' words but our actions, our words, our choices, our example, are completely contrary to his will for us.

Jesus said in Matthew 15:19, *"For out of the heart come evil thoughts..."* And in Isaiah 29:13, *"The Lord says, 'These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.'"*

Remember, my friends, all worship are simply structures put together by people and churches. Remember, the worship God condones in the Bible is not centered in a certain style but rather if it is centered in his Word and comes honestly from the heart. As they say there is no such thing as Christian music, only Christian words and lyrics.

The truth that comes through time and again in Scripture is that what really matters is our hearts. Have you, my friend, committed your life to Jesus by faith? Have you confessed your sins in more than just words? Have you opened your heart and allowed Jesus to wash you clean?

Have you allowed Jesus to cleanse you by his forgiving grace, to heal you from your guilt or pain? Have you allowed, as the Psalmist states in Psalm 51, that God create in you a clean heart, that he put a new spirit of love, care and understanding in you? A heart that is touched by Jesus will be seen in the fruits of how we live.

The good news, my friends, is that the old laws are over. We no longer need to follow all these human made rituals. However now we have a new law which is the law of Jesus. This law is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as we ourselves.

I am very happy today that people can wear whatever they are comfortable with to church and that whether their shirt or hands are clean doesn't say anything about their salvation. I am pleased that there are many varieties of ways to worship in the church today, that they can all be equally effective if they are centered in Jesus and open to the power of the Holy Spirit.

The key in all this is that we know and believe in Jesus by faith, and that we live our lives for him. Jesus came to set us free from all these other outward rules and distractions. Jesus came to set us free so we, you and I can live, from the depth of our hearts a life of love and faith in his Spirit.