

clean and unclean

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[0 : 00] Tomorrow, you have an appointment, and it's an appointment with God.

Now, that may sound rather somber, but I'm not contemplating your imminent death, but you are going to meet with Him. There's an appointment, and you will have the opportunity.

You've been invited to be there face-to-face at this meeting with God. How does that prospect go to you?

How do you respond to that possibility or that prospect of having an appointment with God? What questions arise in your mind as you contemplate that meeting?

What will you wear? Perhaps more importantly, if you are to meet with God, are you ready for that meeting? Are you clean enough to meet with God?

[1 : 09] What about that business, being clean enough to meet with God? Is that necessary? Do we need to be clean to meet with God? Listen to what the psalmist says in that regard, in terms of that very particular question, do we need to be clean enough to meet with God?

In Psalm 24, verses 3 and 4, we read, Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who can go to an appointment with God? Who may stand in His holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart. And then the psalm goes on. Are you clean enough to meet with God?

How can you get clean enough to meet with God, to be received by God? Now, these are big questions, and they are questions that are addressed in the passage that we've read in Mark's gospel.

Now, as you know, those of you who are part of the congregation coming week by week, we've been going through Mark's gospel over these past few months. And as I came to chapter 7, the passage that we've read, and thought, well, what am I going to do with this passage?

[2 : 30] My initial impression wasn't a particularly positive one. I was a bit underwhelmed and maybe just a little apprehensive.

What am I going to do with these verses that we've read just a few moments ago? So, the previous chapter, chapter 6, now that is great material to preach a sermon on.

The feeding of the 5,000. Plenty to say about the feeding of the 5,000. Or Jesus walks on water. How could you not pull together a sermon on a passage like that?

These are exciting stories. They're engaging stories. And it's a joy to read them, to think about them, and indeed, as given opportunity to preach on them.

But then we come to chapter 7. And it all just seems a bit bizarre. Really, it's the first time we've come across a chapter that isn't so easy to understand in a sense.

[3 : 34] All this talk of ceremonial washing and Corban and Jewish regulations that seems so distant and so alien, so removed from our own reality.

What is there here for us today? 21st century Scotland, very different place. And yet we come and we read all this stuff and it just seems all very strange.

What we're going to try and do as we think about this passage, and we're going to try and look at the whole passage that we've read. There's a lot of material there. Because we're going to try and look at the whole passage necessarily, we're not going to get into the details.

But what we are going to try and do is to draw out the big issues. And we're going to try and do that by looking at the passage in three steps or stages.

And that won't follow the order of the passage chronologically or in the order that we read the verses, but in a different way. And I'll tell you what the three stages are. And then as we go through them, hopefully things will become more apparent.

[4 : 41] The three stages are these. First of all, we're going to identify what we're calling shared questions. But then we're going to notice that in trying to answer those questions, there are different or divergent sources to find an answer to the questions.

And then, of course, necessarily if the sources are different, we'll find that there are different answers to the questions that are posed or the questions that are implicit in our passage.

Again, at the moment that may seem all a bit cryptic, but I hope it becomes less so in time. Now, as I've already indicated, in order to deal with the passage in this way, we are going to be jumping from verse to verse in seemingly no apparent order.

But I hope that there is some order behind the seeming chaos. But let's begin by looking at this first step or this first stage. And that is simply to identify shared questions.

And when I say shared questions, what I'm saying is that these are questions shared by the religious leaders who we meet in the passage and by Jesus. The passage begins with this discussion, this debate, this theological discussion that emerges between the religious leaders, the Pharisees, and Jesus.

[6 : 05] We've read the passage, it concerns this matter of why the disciples don't wash their hands. It becomes clear that it's a reference to some kind of ceremonial washing. Mark explains a little bit more about how that was a big deal for the Jews.

So, there's this theological discussion around this matter. And what that reveals is that even though Jesus and the religious leaders will, as we'll see, take very different views on these matters, there is common ground.

And the common ground is what we're calling shared questions. And the two shared questions that I think we can find that lie behind all the discussion and all that is said are these.

First of all, how do we, men and women, how do we get dirty or unclean, to use the language of the passage? How does that happen?

What is it that pollutes us and makes us unclean? That's a question. It's a question that's shared by the Pharisees and by Jesus. They both acknowledge that this is an important question.

[7 : 12] Then the second question, of course, goes together with the first, and that is, how can we get clean? If we acknowledge that we are unclean, if we acknowledge that we as men and women get dirty, well, what can we do about that?

How can we get clean? Again, this is a question that both the religious leaders and Jesus acknowledge to be an important question. So, there's this common ground.

And those shared questions also reveal shared presuppositions concerning the human condition. Let's just think about that for a moment.

We won't spend too much time on this. But think of the two questions and what the questions reveal. First of all, the question, how do we get dirty or unclean?

Well, implicit in that question, there is a lot of common ground between Jesus and the Pharisees. First of all, concerning the nature of dirt, the nature of that which pollutes us.

[8 : 16] And it's very clear that for both Jesus and the Pharisees, the problem is what we might call spiritual dirt. And we think of the Pharisees. Their concern wasn't with hygiene, when they're concerned about the disciples not washing their hands.

It's not that they're concerned that they're going to get a bug, that they're going to get sick because of not cleaning their physical hands or getting rid of physical dirt.

That isn't the concern. Mark makes it very clear that this was a ceremonial washing that went beyond the merely physical. It was a spiritual problem that was addressed in this way.

And this is what the Pharisees said you had to do in order to deal with this spiritual problem, this spiritual dirt that pollutes you. Jesus also acknowledges that the dirt in question is spiritual in character.

When we get to the end of the passage, when He brings His disciples aside and in private explains to them some of what He's been saying to the crowds, it is very evident that the dirt that pollutes us is spiritual in nature.

[9 : 27] From verse 20, What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, and so on.

This is spiritual pollution that is the problem. And though it becomes clear that the Pharisees and Jesus have very different views on this, they both acknowledge that that is the problem.

They also both acknowledge the reality of this spiritual pollution. There's no question that it's a problem. The Pharisees acknowledge it to be a problem.

If it wasn't, they wouldn't have all these rules to get washed. And Jesus clearly also shares that conviction that it's a problem. There's also a shared conviction concerning the seriousness of the matter.

The very fact that the Pharisees and religious leaders had this whole vast array of regulations to deal with it, leaving to one side, although that was a good idea or not, the very fact that they had all these regulations is evidence that they thought it to be a serious problem.

[10 : 38] Hence, all the different ways of dealing with it. And it's also true that Jesus acknowledges this to be a serious problem in what He says and in what He explains to the disciples.

So, in that question that is shared, that is revealed a number of shared, also, presuppositions, presuppositions, but also, that second question that is shared by Jesus and the Pharisees, how can we get clean?

Which goes, of course, together with the first. That too reveals common ground. It reveals that both Jesus and the Pharisees are persuaded on the great need to be clean.

You can't simply accept that you're dirty and, well, so be it. What can be done? No, there's a need to get clean. How you get clean, that's another question. We'll come to that. But that's important. It's something we need to know how we're going to get clean.

But also, both the Pharisees, in a measure, and Jesus hand out or make clear that there's the possibility of being clean. Yes, we're dirty, but there is that prospect, that possibility, that hope of cleansing.

[11 : 56] That the people can lay hold of and do something about. So, that's the shared questions. But then also, the passage deals with a very important matter in dealing with these questions, and it's what we're calling divergent sources.

You want to answer those questions. How do we get dirty? How can we get clean? Well, where do we go for the answers? And here, things go in different directions.

Shared questions, but very different sources for the answers. Indeed, this passage, in many ways, is concerned with this very matter of where do you go for answers to these big questions.

Now, we know in life that it's important to go to reliable sources for information. You know, you hear that Mourinho is going to be the new manager of Manchester United, and, well, that's been a rumor that's been doing the rounds for months, and you think, well, is it true, or is it just another rumor?

Well, what do you do? Do you go to Robbie Savage's Twitter feed, and there you can know for sure if it's true, or you go to the Manchester United website, and there you go to that source?

[13 : 09] Now, I'm not saying maybe Robbie Savage has got more accurate information than the Manchester United website. I don't know. The point is you look for a reliable source to get your answers.

Or somebody says to you, wasn't it just crazy what David Cameron said at Prime Minister Question Times last week? That was just ridiculous what he said. You think, well, I wonder what he said. I know, I'll buy the Daily Mail, and I'll find out what he said.

Or do you go to Hansard online, and there discover verbatim what he said? And take a view on what he said. The point is sources are important. We acknowledge that in life.

And sources are important in dealing with life's big questions. How do I get dirty? How can I get clean? And the Pharisees have their sources, and Jesus has his source.

And let's notice what they are. First of all, the Pharisees. To what source do they turn? Well, the language that we find time and time again through the passage identifies their source for an answer.

[14 : 14] It comes up at the very beginning. There in verse 3, when Mark is explaining this matter of hand-washing, the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the traditions of the elders.

And that phrase repeats itself time and time again. We don't need to find all the occasions that it does so. That's their source to answer the questions, the big questions, the traditions of the elders.

And what was that? Well, the traditions of the elders was an oral tradition, centuries old, whereby generation after generation had added all these rules and regulations.

They had finally been recorded and compiled in the third century B.C. And so there was a record of all these regulations known as the Mishnah.

One way in which the Mishnah was known by the Jews was as a fence around the Torah or the law. So there was a sense, well, this is the law, but the law gives us principles.

[15 : 26] How do you apply those principles? Well, this tradition of the elders, that tells you in every circumstances of life, in every detail, how those principles are to be applied.

That was the idea in any case. Now that doesn't sound so bad, but listen to what Jesus says about the traditions of the elders in verses 8 and 9 of our passage.

He says to the religious leaders, you have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. And he said to them, you have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.

So though it might have seemed a helpful thing to have these regulations that applied the principles, in effect what happened was that the law of God was displaced and it was replaced by rules of men.

That's what actually happened. And Jesus says, that's no way of operating, that's no way of finding out the answers to the big questions when they're simply answers that you have made up and your forefathers have made up for yourselves.

[16 : 42] But that was their source, the traditions of men. Now that is not just an ancient phenomenon. It's a very modern phenomenon.

It's a modern phenomenon and a very contemporary phenomenon in the church. It's really what happened yesterday in the Church of Scotland General Assembly. The law of God was set aside to be replaced by new traditions of men, while at the same time purporting to remain loyal to God's law.

This is the official stance. Nothing has changed. We still believe the Bible. We still believe what the Bible says about marriage, but at the same time we'll add these traditions of men.

And in effect, you simply replace God's law with the traditions of men. Of course, that's something that doesn't just happen in the Church of Scotland. We're all tempted to replace God's law with our own rules, with our own ideas, with our own regulations.

It's interesting that you see this also in the political realm, in civil society. When we think of our own nation, the more we as a nation choose to reject God's law, what you actually find is that you need to replace God's law with a whole panoply of laws to fill the gap.

[18 : 05] And so God's law, God's principles, God's order, is replaced by the traditions of men. Well, that's what the Pharisees did. That's where they went to find an answer to the questions.

And the answer was, well, you have to do these ceremonial washings and you have to do this and that and the next thing. But that was their source. What about Jesus? What is Jesus' source to answer these big questions?

Well, He's very clear. In verse 6, He replied, Isaiah was right when He prophesied about you hypocrites. And then the crucial words are the words that follow, as it is written.

As it is written, Jesus goes to the Word of God. He says, yes, these are big questions. Yes, the human condition is a serious one. We need to be cleansed.

It's good to be concerned about that, but where do we find out how we can be clean? Where do we find out how we get dirty? We go to God's Word. He is the one who tells us in His Word concerning these matters.

[19 : 11] And also, of course, in the critique that He has of the Pharisees, He also very clearly identifies His source for answers. In verse 8, you have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.

Where does Jesus go? Does He go to the traditions of men? No, He goes to the commands of God. That is where He will find answers to the big questions. So, divergent sources.

This is critical. This is critical for us as believers to be very clear on where we go to find answers. As we live in a society that increasingly rejects God's Word, we must remain clear and firm on where we turn to for answers.

Even if those answers prove to be very unpalatable and unpopular with those around us, with the society that we are part of. And we need to know these answers not only for ourselves, but we do need to know them for ourselves, but we also need to know these answers to communicate them and to a dying society and world that needs answers because these are questions that everybody needs to know the answers to.

We have the answers in God's Word. God tells us why it is that we as men and women get dirty and are unclean and why it is that we can't ascend the hill of God as we are.

[20 : 42] He tells us why that is. But He also tells us in His Word how we can get clean and so be welcomed and embraced by God.

Sources are important to where do we turn to find the answers. But that leads us to the third element that I think is covered in these broad brush strokes in this passage, and that is different answers to the shared questions.

It's the inevitable destination, really, of how we've been traveling. We acknowledge that there are these questions that are shared by Jesus and the religious leaders, but then we recognize that they go to very different places to find answers.

So what do they find? What are the answers to these questions? Why am I dirty? Why am I unclean? Why can I not go before God as I am in my own merit?

Why is that? And what can I do to get clean? For that appointment with God. So what are the answers? Well, let's think of the answers that the Pharisees found.

[21 : 54] And just find them, they really made them up. But let's say they found in the traditions of men. Let's think about, first of all, of what the answers they came to about this matter of how we get dirty.

And really, we can sum up their answer to that question in this way, that they argued that you get dirty or contaminated from the outside in.

That's the direction of travel, if you wish. It's from the outside in that contamination occurs. So for the Pharisees and the religious leaders, it was all about who you mixed with, what kind of people you dealt with and were surrounded by.

It was about what you touched. It was about what you ate, what you consumed. Those things that you would touch and mix with, those were the things that polluted you.

These externals, things out there, contaminated you and made you unclean from the outside in. Now when we think about that, what you eat and who you meet and what you touch, again, that sounds very strange, even primitive.

[23 : 10] But is it so different to the ideas that we often embrace or are also persuaded by in some measure?

I remember just of anecdotal interest a few years ago, this was in Peru and I was meeting up with some friends who, from the church, for a kickabout.

We just went to a spare piece of ground and we thought, we'll have a kickabout and I don't know, there was half a dozen of us. And we got to where we were planning to play this game of football and there weren't enough of us.

You know, we thought more people would come and there wasn't enough people and we thought, well, this is pretty hopeless to have a proper kickabout with so few people. And I saw a few other people who obviously were in the same predicament.

We didn't know who they were but they had a ball as well and there was only a few of them. And so I said to one of my friends, I said, well, why don't we play with them? Because, you know, all of us together we've got enough for a game.

[24 : 08] And he looked at me and he said, we can't play with them, they're worldly. I thought, just a game of football. But that was the idea that somehow we would be contaminated by these worldly people.

I don't even know if they were worldly in fairness, but anyway, maybe he knew better than I did. But that was the idea. No, we're going to be contaminated by those things that are on the outside and it will do us spiritual harm.

We need to hide away from those things that contaminate us and that way we can remain pure. If we hide away, if we build our own little kingdoms where nobody unclean can come in, then we'll be fine.

We'll remain pure and clean and acceptable to God. Of course, you don't need to go to Peru to know about that perspective, even in our own tradition.

We're not free from that way of thinking. Purity is preserved, so it has often been argued by where we don't go, by not going to the pub or not going to the pictures or not going to the Caley.

[25 : 17] If you avoid these things, you remain pure. You'll be okay. The idea is that the default position is that you're clean and you better not get dirty and if you go to those places, then you're going to get dirty, so don't do it.

We need to avoid contamination from the outside in. Well, that's what the Pharisees believed about how we get dirty, but also, of course, they had answers about how to get clean.

And this also, not surprisingly, is a matter that works from the outside in. At least, they were consistent. You get dirty from the outside in, or you can get clean also from the outside in.

And that's what the ceremonial washings are all about at the beginning of the chapter. We don't need to go back there again. washing your hands and washing your kitchen implements and your plates and all these things.

Washing the outside that by that means you can also clean the inside that had become polluted and contaminated from the outside in.

[26 : 22] Well, that's the answer that they had for this problem, this reality of the human condition. A really big question is, does it work?

This method of cleansing, does it work? Did the compulsive cleansing of the Pharisees, a kind of religious OCD, did it get them any closer to God?

Well, did it. Well, what does Jesus say? Jesus identifies two consequences of their attempt at cleansing. In verse 6, what does He say to them?

He addresses them from the Word of God and He describes them in this way, you hypocrites. These people, quoting Isaiah, these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

So the answer that they provide, far from getting people closer to God, got people further away from God. And there's no worse place to be than far from God.

[27 : 24] You can be on the most idyllic spot in this world of ours, bathing in a tropical paradise, but if you're far from God, it is a hellish paradise.

All man-made attempts to get close to God take you in the opposite direction, which is what happened to the Pharisees and those who followed them. It was one consequence, but not only far from God, also their answer led them to be full of self.

In verses 10 to 13, Jesus gives us an example of how what they were doing was actually subverting God's law and moving it to one side and replacing it with their own laws.

And He gives the example of the command to honor your father and mother. He said, look what you've done. You've brought in this other idea, this other rule that you can identify your wealth as korban, dedicated to God, and that way you don't need to give it to your mother or father, provide for them in their old age or in their need.

Now, this was a very convenient regulation because what you could do is you could identify your wealth as dedicated to God, but you didn't actually have to give it to God until you died. And you could use it for yourself until you died.

[28 : 43] Very convenient. So you could enjoy your wealth and not honor your mother or father, not provide for them in their old age, and then when you died, well, it was dedicated to God. Well, that's just one example that Jesus gives.

He says, your answers to the big questions, not only do they drive you far from God, but they need you to live selfish lives, not helping others, not loving others as God intends.

Now, these attempts at cleansing and improving the human condition by changing outside externals is not something that only religious folks do, though religious people are particularly prone to this mistake.

Political philosophies across the spectrum of the left and of the right also very often focus on externals or the outside as being the problem.

If we go back to the dawn of the 20th century, there was much enthusiasm in our own country, in the West, if we can use that expression, much enthusiasm concerning the civilizing influence of economic and educational progress.

[30 : 00] and the underlying idea was that people are basically good, and if we can build a society that is relatively prosperous and reasonably well-educated, all will be well.

There was huge enthusiasm and optimism about the future. But then two world wars and the Holocaust appeared on the scene of history and seemed to have put pay to such naivety.

But we don't learn. We don't want to learn. We don't want to accept that the problem is not out there, but in here. Even today, if we listen to our political leaders, listen to David Cameron, listen to Obama, listen to Sturgeon, so often, as they look to the future, often with stirring language and optimistic language, their starting point, their philosophical starting point is that we're all basically good, but that there's stuff out there that's bad.

Poverty and poor education and poor health and injustice. Now, these things are bad, but if only we can sort these things out, then all will be well. Now, the people I mentioned, and no doubt I could mention many others, they're clever people, well-meaning people, but in this regard, spectacularly naive.

What about Jesus? We're coming to the close. What are the answers that Jesus finds to these big questions? How do I get dirty?

[31 : 32] And how can I get clean? Well, Jesus, sticking stubbornly to His source, proposes a radically different perspective, a perspective that is diametrically opposed to the perspective of the Pharisees.

We'll start with this matter of getting dirty. What does Jesus explain as being the cause of our pollution? Well, it's at the end of the passage.

From verse 20, He went on, What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean, for from within, out of men's hearts come.

And then you have this whole gory list of sins. Not from the outside in, but from the inside out.

It's the complete opposite. The source, the reason, the cause of our pollution. As has been said, and it's a pithy saying, but it gets across a real truth.

[32 : 39] The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. And it has always been thus. In the words of the wise man recorded for us in Proverbs chapter 23 and verse 7, As he thinks in his heart, so is he.

As we think in our heart, as I think in my heart, so I am. We get dirty, not from the outside in, but from the inside out.

Which leads us to the next question. In many ways, the bigger question or the necessary question that follows on. What about getting clean?

Well, it's symmetrical. As with the problem, so with the solution. The solution has got to be inside out. Now, Jesus doesn't, in this passage, give us the answer to how we can get clean on the inside, how we can solve the problem of a polluted heart.

He identifies the problem, but he doesn't, in these verses, give us the answer. However, we know from the rest of the Gospels and indeed the whole of the Bible that the whole mission of Messiah was to secure for us, sinners as we are, that which we cannot secure for ourselves.

- [34 : 07] That inner and complete cleansing that allows us to ascend the hill of God, to make that appointment with God and know that we'll be received because we've been cleansed and can enter into His presence.

Jesus recognizes, and we recognize with Him, that we can't clean ourselves. The prophet Jeremiah had made the point many years before.

Chapter 2 of the prophecy, although you wash yourself with soda and use an abundance of soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Sovereign Lord.

We can't clean ourselves from the inside out. But listen to what John says about what Jesus can do from the inside out.

And I'm simply going to read verses that we find in John's first letter and the first chapter and from verse 5 and following. This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you, God is light.

- [35 : 19] In Him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with Him, yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.

Here is the cleansing agent. We are dirty. We are unclean. We cannot enter into the presence of God as we are. We need to be cleansed.

We can't clean ourselves. But Jesus brought this message and secured this solution. The blood of Jesus, His atoning death in our place, taking the punishment that we deserve, secured for us, cleansing.

And He cleanses us from the inside out. He purifies our corrupt heart. Of course, John goes on in presenting to his readers the message that Jesus brought.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

- [36 : 41] We can't clean ourselves, but what we can do and what we must do is recognize our need of cleansing and turn to the one who is able and willing and ready to cleanse us.

And as we turn to Jesus, the one who shed blood cleanses us from all sin. The one who came to take away the sin of the world as we come to Him, as we confess our sins, as we repent of our sins, and as we ask Him to cleanse us, so He cleanses us from the inside out.

So what about your appointment tomorrow with God? Could you make that appointment? Are you able to go and meet with God?

Are you clean enough to meet with God? Jesus can clean you. His blood, His atoning death can purify you from all sin.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the manner in which it deals with the big questions that we must confront as men and women.

- [37 : 50] And we acknowledge that there can be a few bigger questions than the reality, the somber reality of our fallen condition, that we are sinners, that we do fall short, that we are selfish, that our hearts are full of evil.

And though we may try and pretend otherwise, and though we may be able to even give the impression to others that it is not so, in the quietness of our own heart and in the measure that honesty prevails, we acknowledge that it is so, that that is who we are.

That is the problem that we face. What are we to do with ourselves? But we thank You that in the gospel we have an answer to the human condition. We thank You that in Jesus we have one who has come and has dealt with our sin.

We thank You for His death in our place. We thank You for His shed blood that purifies us from all unrighteousness. And we pray that we would know what it is to turn to Him, to seek His forgiveness and to receive it and to experience it in our own lives.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.