

Matthew 15:10-20
The direction of defilement

**Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.**

(Psalm 119:34)

I had an

Overhead: e-mail

early last week from Alan Burns, the pastor at Helston Baptist Church. Could I possibly record on my phone a video saying what my favourite Bible verse was, and why? Um ... in no more than 30 seconds. Not a lot longer than it's taken to say this.

The short passage that I chose – though I only had time to describe it, rather than read it out – was where some people are trying to get Jesus into hot water by whatever answer he gives to a carefully-thought-out trick question:

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

(Matthew 22:17)

That's the one where Jesus asks one of them to pull out a

Overhead: denarius

points out that that is Caesar's head on it, and therefore

Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”

(Matthew 22:21)

That is just such a brilliant answer to the question ... and it's actually done by *not* answering the question, did you notice? Typical Rabbi trick, really. Not to be evasive – though it can be good for that, too – but to actually get people to think in more depth about the question they've asked. So the guy complains to the Rabbi ...

Why do you always answer a question with another question?

You surely know the answer by now? I must have told you this one before!

And what's wrong with answering a question with another question?

And very often Jesus very wisely refused to take sides when people accosted him with questions, particularly if they were very obviously loaded. But I find it interesting that in the passage we've read today, he comes down *very* clearly on one side of an argument, and he doesn't seem at all fussed that it riles some of the people around him:

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?”

(Matthew 15:12)

Actually, I think the disciples are right to be concerned here. There is no virtue in causing offence if you can legitimately avoid doing so. There are times when you have to be very mindful of the people around you, and bite your tongue.

When you come together, ... Let all things be done for building up.

(1 Corinthians 14:26)

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

(Ephesians 4:29)

That's a good rule to work by in church, particularly. If I'm talking on a particularly sensitive subject, I will all the more carefully get my words right on my script, and make sure I stick very precisely to them. How many times have you not wanted – or even refused – to say *Amen* to a prayer when someone has just turned it into a Party Political Broadcast? No, we really do need to consider how what we say may “give grace to those who hear”. When we pray *publicly*, we can't ignore the other people present and hide behind a super-spiritual “I wasn't talking to you” if they come back at you.

So isn't it really quite surprising here that Jesus publicly flatly contradicts the teaching of these emissaries from the religious high-ups?

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ...

(Matthew 15:1)

He answers their implicit accusation with an even weightier one of his own:

He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?”

(Matthew 15:3)

He uses a highly inflammatory word, to their face:

“You hypocrites!”

(Matthew 15:7)

And then he deliberately calls the crowd who must have overhead all of this going on, and makes a definitive public statement contradicting their position:

And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.”

(Matthew 15:10-11)

“Giving grace to those who hear”? These are pretty strong words to “give grace”. This has to be a frightfully serious subject to merit risking that level of outrage. So it has to be something that we need to get our heads around too. Because, as Jesus shows us here, **“defilement” is a real problem, and a matter of our hearts.**

Where *should* the spotlight shine?

But *why* is it dark inside?

How can the rot be stopped?

■ Where *should* the spotlight shine?

This passage really does follow on quite tightly after the preceding section. I hope you remember the specific point of contention that this group of scribe and Pharisees had travelled all the way from Jerusalem to challenge Jesus about:

“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.”

(Matthew 15:2)

And the idea was that if, somehow, through the course of the day, a person had become “defiled” – the word is actually “common”, but the implication is “not good enough for God, or one of his people”. It certainly is quite close to a “holier than thou” attitude, to my mind. So the thought was that if a person's hands were “defiled”, the hands touch the food ... and that makes the *food* “defiled”. And then you eat the food, so the “defiled” food enters your body and makes now the *inner parts* of your body “defiled” as well.

Now I'm not quite sure of the total logic of this, but I could imagine there's a hugely emotive side to this. When the Bible speaks of

Overhead: “the heart”

it's in a quite different from how we sometimes do nowadays. Quite apart from the physical aspects of the heart as the blood pump that keeps us alive, and even the source of some less-well-known hormones, when the Bible says “the heart”, it means, if you like “the real person inside”.

And while it's fair to say that we sometimes do use the word in that sense in English – we might say someone is “good at heart”. A really nasty person is *black-hearted* – though that might be a phrase which becomes not politically correct fairly soon.

But we also use the word in an almost exclusively emotional way. I hope I can dare give this example, safely six months away in both directions, but remember that song we hear every Christmas now?

Overhead: last Christmas ...

... I gave you my heart

It's obviously not the literal body organ. The singer is not *literally* broken-hearted – that would mean *dead!* In the context of that song, though, is there much more to it than simply the emotions, and the excitement of that moment and then the anguish that that relationship is immediately broken?

But when you get the word in the Bible, “heart” includes emotions, but they come merely as an expression of something even deeper: the will, the personality, the deep desires and drives within you. Yes, your emotions feature, but only as a part of your whole view of life and the universe and everything that shapes everything you do and say.

So actually, I do get why these scribes and Pharisees inwardly shudder when they think that *the heart*, in *that* sense, could somehow be defiled – and that you could guard against that inner corruption by the relatively simple expedient of rinsing your hands before eating must have seemed hugely attractive.

And yet, says Jesus, this is entirely the wrong way around to think of this. The direction of defilement is totally the other way around. And this is not just a technical point, a mere theological nitpick. It's something that *everyone* needs to know.

And so at that point, with people having overheard something of the conversation, Jesus presumably wants to make not “his position”, but *the truth of the matter* absolutely crystal clear. It needs a categorical public statement.

And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.”

(Matthew 15:10-11)

He says it again, even more strongly, when explaining things over again to his disciples a little later. First, a mostly delicate explanation of the basics relating to food.

“Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled?”

(Matthew 15:17)

What goes in at one end doesn't just end up on the inside. It emerges at the other end some time later. Think

Overhead: sweetcorn

if you need proof. So, summary:

“... to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”

(Matthew 15:20)

Total contradiction to one aspect of the Pharisees' thinking. And yet Jesus *does* agree with another aspect of their thinking. Defilement is *real*. It is not a trivial matter at all. And it's even true that the mouth is involved in the process – just in the opposite direction. Jesus had said it earlier, to the crowd:

“Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.”

(Matthew 15:10-11)

That's developed a bit when he speaks to the disciples:

“But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.”

(Matthew 15:18-20)

This is serious stuff. I think we could actually put a colon after “evil thoughts”, and treat the rest of the list as examples of what those “evil thoughts” are. Thoughts that will lead to murder. Thoughts that will lead to adultery. And so on, working through, did you notice, the Ten Commandments – but not needing to mention the one about honouring

parents, as he has already done that before, speaking to the Pharisees about that “Corban” nonsense.

So, says Jesus, this is deadly serious stuff. Things like this *do* defile a person. They *do* make them unfit for God. And that is such a deadly peril that Jesus must risk alienating the scribes and Pharisees:

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?”

(Matthew 15:12)

Maybe the disciples say that out of residual respect for the Pharisees. Or maybe it's fear, for there's no way that this won't be reported back to Jerusalem and cause trouble for the future. Remember that it's now less than a year until the time that Jesus will arrive in Jerusalem ...

... it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.' O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

(Luke 13:33-34)

And I suspect it is with that sad resignation concerning Jerusalem that he also speaks about the scribes and Pharisees he has scandalised:

He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides.”

(Matthew 15:13-14)

Sadly, the best that we can do with people like that is to simply not pay them attention. If they refuse to open their eyes, that's very sad. But it would be worse if you continue to follow them!

“And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

(Matthew 15:14)

Folks, I think there are times when we must apply this in our 21st-century British lives, too. There are religious people around, and some of them in clerical clothes, too, who will deny, subtly or overtly, the truths of the Gospel and the person of Jesus Christ. They will try to reinterpret the Bible in order to fit in with the popular notions of our modern society. They will try to tame God. They will try to gag him. Those awkward, unpleasant bits of the Bible just have to be muted or even deleted.

They will say that God is love, but in a very fuzzy way, such that it makes no difference how we live, he accepts anyone and everyone irrespective, he just forgives because that's what he is there to do, so that we can all feel good about ourselves again.

They will even say that there is no pit for anyone to fall into. And that shows even more clearly just how blind they actually are.

And there may be times when they need to be confronted, as Jesus does in this chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Or perhaps, more often, we just need to move along, if they

insist on wearing that blindfold. By all means continue to pray for them. Jesus says they need it. But don't *follow* them. Not even on Facebook or Twitter.

He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides."

(Matthew 15:13-14)

■ **But *why* is it dark inside?**

Now we've gone through the passage, perhaps a bit quicker than sometimes. But that's because it occurs to me that we need to leave some time to talk about

Overhead: the elephant in the room

How come it is dark inside? Or, to use the kind of way Jesus describes it here

"But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts ... These are what defile a person."

(Matthew 15:18-20)

Why are our hearts like that? *Why* are there things in there that can emerge and give rise to such carnage, in our own lives, and in the lives of the people around us? *Why* is it dark inside?

Why is it that, to quote *The Preacher* from Ecclesiastes,

See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

(Ecclesiastes 7:29)

Isn't it that the many schemes came from one scheme, that foolish notion of the first man – swallowing first the lie of the Serpent and then the one fruit that that God had placed off-limits? That old lie of autonomy – the word means literally "being a law to oneself". Instead of "becoming like God" in the sense of growing in likeness and depth of his character, Adam and Eve accept the Serpent's spin on that phrase:

"You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

(Genesis 3:4-5)

And between them, they decide that, instead of God's command, they will accept their own conclusions – fuelled by the Serpent's twistings and misrepresentations:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

(Genesis 3:6)

And the NT asserts that this infection spread throughout the whole human race. There was no immunity. Nobody could practice shielding. And in the end, that infection would prove 100% fatal. Not just sin. *Death* through sin.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned ...
(Romans 5:12)

And that symptom, the desire for autonomy and self-determination, persists. We say *I will do it*

Overhead: *my way.*

I will be my own master, my own law-giver, my own god. Because ...

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."
(Psalms 14:1)

Notice where the fool says this: in his *heart*. And the disease progresses. Notice where that progression is seen: in our *hearts*. And now in our heads as well. The darkness deepens. We become benighted, in several meanings of that word.

For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.
(Romans 1:21)

Conclusion:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?
(Jeremiah 17:9)

And it is a conclusion that Jesus endorses, just in passing, earlier in Matthew:

"If you then, who are evil, ..."
(Matthew 7:11)

If the headwaters are dark, is it any surprise that the river in full flow is also dark?

"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person."
(Matthew 15:19-20)

It is not a pleasant diagnosis. But we need a *true* diagnosis, if we are ever going to find a cure for this otherwise inevitably fatal illness.

■ **How can the rot be stopped?**

If all of this is true, how can we ever think to sing stuff like we have already this morning? How can there be any hope for this?

*My heart is filled with thankfulness ...
When Christ shall come, with shouts of acclamation,
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!*

Actually, the seeds of hope were very clearly planted way back in the OT. The metaphor is modified a little – but it's still a matter, notice, of that *heart*.

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

(Ezekiel 36:25-26)

But – same thing, back to the original picture – we also see the darkness of that heart being dispelled by light:

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

(2 Corinthians 4:6)

And not just something impersonal like light, or even something a bit more particular, knowledge.

... having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ...

(Ephesians 1:18)

The good news of the Gospel is even more glorious: it is that *God* becomes resident in our hearts:

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

(Galatians 4:6)

And we're not just told *that* it may happen. We're told *how*:

... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith ...

(Ephesians 3:17)

You see, there is a big danger in coming to a church that insists on teaching the Bible. I could be merely filling your *minds* with the truth of God. That wouldn't be bad. But it wouldn't be *enough*. After all, the Devil knows all that stuff, and he is still the Devil! Just as it has to be more than emotion, it has to be more than just knowledge.

Folks, why are we given new hearts, when we put our trust in Jesus, when we turn from our sins and embrace him as our Saviour and our Lord? It is so that old inward throne in our hearts, where we had insisted on sitting, so desperately insisting on ruling the course of our lives, ... that old throne can be scrapped and chucked out.

A new throne can be built there, where our rightful ruler will come and take residence, and reign in justice and joy and peace.

It's only so good if I *tell* you this is true. I need to urge you, to persuade you, to exhort you, even to command you:

Don't just think "this is a great idea": *do it*.

Don't just recognise that "Jesus Christ is Lord": *bow* before him.

Don't simply conclude that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and my sins:
put your trust in him

Do not just accept that Jesus was a magnificent, fascinating, wise and challenging teacher. Do not even simply accept that he is the fulfilment of all those OT prophecies, that he is *Immanuel*, God with us. Don't stop at that: *worship* him, *love* him, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

(2 Thessalonians 3:5)

**Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.**

(Psalm 119:34)