

The Gospel of Mark

Part 24

Jesus Confronts
the Tradition of the Elders

TALKINGPOINTS WALKINGPOINTS



A publication of **DISCIPLE**, the adult discipleship ministry of Triangle Community Church.

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Talk together about the glory of God's kingdom. –Psalm 145:11
Love the Lord your God and **walk** in all his ways. –Joshua 22:5

Triangle Community Church aims to be a "transforming church". We exist to be used by God as He transforms ordinary people into extraordinary followers of Jesus Christ. TCC believes not only that life-change is possible—but that it is to be expected. Growth is God's will for his people. But transformation does not happen by accident. It requires intentional, intelligent action. 1 Timothy 4:7 instructs you to "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." Since "Talking Points, Walking Points" is intended both for individual reflection and for group discussion, questions vary in degree of vulnerability required. Generally it is best to begin group discussions with questions which involve less personal disclosure—but don't linger there. Be sure to "dive deep" too! The questions which require the greatest openness and honesty, as well as those in the section entitled "Digging Deeper in your Daily Quiet Time", are perfect for private reflection.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

- What from Sunday's message interested you? ...made sense to you? ...confused you?
...intrigued you? ...upset you? ...encouraged you? ...and **why**?
- What are some evidences you've seen that all mankind has a sense of our own spiritual uncleanness?
What are some evidences that attempts at removing our own spiritual uncleanness don't work?
- The Pharisees were engaging in what we now call "virtue signalling". Read Matthew 6:1–2.
What are some **contemporary forms of religious** virtue signalling you've seen?
How is virtue signalling actually an attempt to establish our own righteousness in the eyes of others?
What's an example of virtue signalling in which you're tempted to engage?
- Being "unclean"—for any reason—made it impossible to worship in the Old Testament (Leviticus 7:21).
Read Leviticus 22:1–3. What was God's major concern, his major reason, for requiring us to be clean?
To what degree do you think that concern should impact our practice of worship today—**and why**?
Are you ever fearful of being in God's presence? Why or why not? Should we be? Why or why not?

Still a bit confused by this "clean/unclean" thing? This week's **Digging Deeper** feature will help!

Sermon Summary

After reading Mark 6:53-7:23 you might be thinking, “That was a silly debate! Who cares about ceremonial washings?” But Jesus engaged in that debate, and he never debated something that wasn’t important. A profound universal principle is at stake in this debate. This passage breaks down into three sections: [1] we all have a deep sense of spiritual uncleanness or moral defilement (v. 1-5), [2] how all of us try to deal with that universal sense of uncleanness we all have (v. 6-13), and [3] why our attempts at self-cleansing will never be successful (v. 14-23). Let’s take them one at a time.

[1] We have a universal sense of spiritual uncleanness. Old Testament laws confuse us; they seem outdated, weird, unnecessary. But the rationale for these laws is tied to God’s holiness—and our lack of it. In the Old Testament you were not allowed to worship God if you had been in contact with filth, disease, or decay. That is why the priests had to carefully wash before entering the sanctuary. If you touched something dead, had diarrhea or an infectious skin disease, if you found mildew on your clothes, you couldn’t enter the temple. God was teaching us that sin does to the soul what filth, disease, and decay do to the body. Sin defiles and alienates us. The truth is, we all struggle with guilt and shame in some way. We try to justify it. We try to cover it. We try to hide it. We try to atone for it. In one way or another, we’re always washing! Deep inside, we know that we’re defiled.

[2] How we try to deal with our sense of spiritual uncleanness. The way the Pharisees dealt with their sense of uncleanness reflects how we seek to do it too. God never commanded the fanatical washings the Pharisees performed. They were man-made rules which wrongly elevated traditions to the level of Scripture—or above in some cases! They hypocritically insisted that others keep their traditions while neglecting God’s laws which they found to be too personally constricting. Instead of honoring father and mother by providing for them in their old age, they would “dedicate their wealth to God” and use it only for “spiritual purposes.” How convenient! But this enabled them to justify anything! A new house in which to have prayer meetings—very spiritual! A new boat where we can entertain our church friends? Spiritual! But helping our aging parents in their time of need? Not Spiritual! But we find our own ways to lower God’s standard so we don’t feel the need to wash away our guilt, or we seek to atone for our failure to meet God’s standard in one area by being more rigorous or more faithful in another area. Everyone does it. We pick and choose. The Pharisees did it. We do it. Whenever we lift up part of God’s law while neglecting other parts, we create a manageable law, a law that’s doable. Then, to further justify ourselves, we criticize others who don’t see things the same way we do.

[3] These methods don’t work. Why? Because our uncleanness comes from within us! Greed, deceit, arrogance, murder, and theft come from within us. And sin’s defilement is not limited to any given group. Our hearts are defiled and desperately need to be cleansed and transformed! Discipline, hard work, and following rules won’t cleanse us. Our problems are far too radical for that. We can’t cure or wash our hearts; they are too radically defiled for that! The Pharisees whittled God’s law down to something that was manageable, to something doable. The only way the gospel will ever make sense to us is if we have a high view of the law and of holiness. The “cleanest” Jew ever was the High Priest on the day of Atonement. He would have secluded himself for a week, washed multiple times, changed his clothes, and spent the night in prayer—and yet Zechariah 3:1-10 reveals that, compared to God, it was as if he was smeared with excrement! Yes, we should seek to live holy lives in the power of God’s Spirit, and yes, we must confess all known sin, but we must not try to cleanse ourselves! It is God who provides us with cleansing, clothing us in his righteousness!

Clean and Unclean, Holy and Common

by Ed Welch

There are spiritual realities associated with shame—but in order to understand them first we need to talk about crayfish and cows. When we read the Old Testament, we often skip all that talk about things that are “clean” and “unclean”. Who really cares that animals with split hooves that chew the cud are clean (Leviticus 11:3), while owls, shrimp, and lizards are unclean? Who even knows what a completely split hoof is? And why are the unclean animals, which include majestic soaring birds, called “detestable”?

This seems like a lot of archaic stuff for scholars to sort out, but actually these ideas have a lot of significance today. Even today we categorize some meats as edible (that is, “clean”) such as cows, pigs, and escargot, and other meat as just plain wrong (that is, “unclean”)—things such as dogs, cats, and garden slugs. All of the fine details boil down to this: *There are clean and unclean animals. There are clean and unclean people.*

CLEAN and UNCLEAN

Leviticus 10:10 states, “*You are to distinguish between the **holy** and the **common**, and between the **unclean** and the **clean**.*” With these four categories of (1) holy, (2) common, (3) clean, and (4) unclean, God gives us the basic building blocks of the spiritual universe! They are two separate groups. You can’t be “a little clean” or “sort of unclean”. You are one or the other. Clean is acceptable; unclean is defiled and cast out. Clean is normal; unclean is abnormal. The clean can’t cleanse the unclean, but the unclean can contaminate the clean.

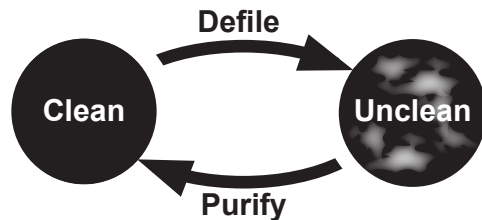


Unclean

If you are unclean, something is wrong with you. You stick out and you are kicked out (like lepers, in biblical times). The person has done something, or had something done to him, that makes him damaged goods. Uncleanness strikes us all: “*We **all** have become like one who is unclean, and **all** our ‘righteous’ deeds are like a polluted garment.*” (Isaiah 64:6). It seems unfair that both perpetrators and victims should be placed in the same category, but God is making a point. Both our actions and our associations make us unclean—and uncleanness doesn’t belong in his kingdom. That **doesn’t** mean the unclean are unwelcome, but it does mean that God must **do something** for them before they can enter his presence. Unclean is **not** the same as sin. The unclean **might** be guilty; they **always** experience shame. The unclean were cut off from other people. They were untouchable. They were sent outside the camp. To re-enter the community they needed to be cleansed. The unclean **could** return to the community; the Old Testament spends a lot of time explaining how people could become part of the group again.

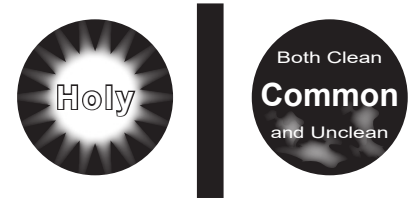
Clean

Clean, of course, is the opposite of unclean. You feel normal. There’s no reason to cover up, nothing to hide. Your conscience is clear. Nobody is looking at you funny or suggesting you don’t belong. You could freely come and go to the temple, the place of God’s presence. When you feel fine, you are hardly aware of your body. It feels normal, which is very good. You already know that a “clean” place exists—you sense that most people live there and fear that you never will. You are unclean—a crab—and a crab can’t suddenly morph into a cow (a clean animal). You assume that there is no path between the two, only thick, impenetrable walls. And you are right. You can’t simply decide to walk over to the clean part of town. But you **can** do something. In the Old Testament there were rituals for purifying the unclean—blood sacrifices. The shedding of blood reminds us that there was a significant cost involved in moving from unclean to clean. The price had to be paid, but an innocent animal, not you, paid it. God himself gave this system; he provided the way to be clean.



HOLY and COMMON

The clean and the unclean, though very different from each other, both have the same parent—the “common”. The common is separate from the holy.



Holy

The category of the holy is all about God. He is the Holy One. Anything he declares uniquely his also **becomes** holy—and is highly honored (Leviticus 10:3). For example, the Garden of Eden was holy. It was the place where God was present on earth. Until they rejected God and were cast out of the garden, Adam and Eve shared in that holiness (because your reputation depends on your associations). Certain places **became holy**, such as Mount Sinai, when God was present. Certain days—“feast days”—were holy (Leviticus 23:2). The weekly Sabbath was holy (Leviticus 23:3). These places, things, and days were **consecrated**, made holy, or dedicated to the Lord.

People, too, could be holy or sacred, even though they belonged to the realm of the common (ie, created things). To be holy, you had to be clean, but being clean didn’t automatically make you holy. You had to be clean **and** holy. If you were unclean, you could become clean, and that made you okay with other people. But there was still a barrier between you and God, and **both** barriers had to be breached before you were really okay and able to enjoy full acceptance and fellowship with the Holy One.

Every Jew wanted to be clean—his well-being depended on it. But would all of them desire to be holy? Probably not. Most settled for being clean, because the holy can be dangerous. “Holy” means that a person or object is uniquely devoted to God. The person or thing belongs to God and thereby shares in his holiness. It is **set apart** in the best possible way: while the unclean were set apart because of their contamination, those made holy were set apart because of their special relationship with the Holy One. They were uniquely honored. The **entire people** of God were **called to be** holy: “I am Yahweh who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:45)

Common

Don’t be too concerned about this fourth category. The holy relates to God; the common relates to all created things (people included). Basically, every person and created thing is “common”. There shouldn’t be any shame in this, but ever since sin entered the world, uncleanness has become a universal problem. Thanks to the cross of Christ, however, the unclean can be cleansed and the common can be made holy. In the New Testament the journey from unclean to clean and holy is called **justification** and **sanctification**.

The moment we repent of our sins (uncleanness) and trust in Christ’s blood, we belong to God, and he **declares** us holy. This **instantaneous event** is our justification. Romans 5:6-9 says: *“While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Now, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the coming wrath of God through Christ.”*



Once we are justified, the **process** of sanctification begins, through which we **become** more and more like the Holy One **in our actual behavior**. As Romans 6:19 (NLT) and 1 Thessalonians 4:7 say: *“Previously, you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become sanctified... For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.”*

To those who feel unclean, holiness is intimidating. But it is only as God declares us holy (justification) and we pursue holiness (sanctification), that we have friendship with the Holy One, our “Abba Father”. **This** is the deepest answer to our problem of shame.

From: *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection*, by Ed Welch, pages 65-75.

Adapted and Excerpted by Dan Clement