

“SHOUT! It Out”  
Matthew 15:1-20  
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Preached August 17, 2008 at San José, Costa Rica

When I worked at the Waffle House, the deep South’s version of the local diner, I would come home smelling for all the world like the grease I had used to fry a thousand eggs and cook a hundred waffles. My white Waffle House shirt with the red, yellow, and orange trim would be stained beyond the powers of any but the most powerful chemical agents, the kind they once searched for in and around Baghdad. As most landlords do not care to have muriatic acid running through their washing machines, I was forced to turn to other alternatives and tried everything in the supermarket. The only thing that would work was, you guessed it, SHOUT! Come on, you remember the old commercial. “What am I supposed to do with this awful stain?” the harried mother would say plaintively, looking at the grass stained trousers of her twin mischief-makers. And the children would yell in one accord, “Shout it out!” And the problem was solved. I’m afraid to know the chemical composition of SHOUT! but would that it was so easy to remove the stains and the problems of this world by rubbing on a little toxic cleanser.

Jesus was apparently perceived as a stain on the purity of the religious traditions of the elders of his time. Some of his disciples had apparently decided their hunger could not wait until they found a proper place to wash up before dinner and they were spotted by the watchful eyes of the Pharisees and some of the

Scribes who had come from Jerusalem, the heavy hitters whose interpretation of Scripture was almost as powerful as the law itself. Notice I said almost. Jesus remembers the almost factor and not so gently reminds them, with the words of Isaiah, that they are the ones staining the law and rendering it meaningless.

The scribes and Pharisees were taking issue with the disciples' violation of one of the safeguards of the law. As always, the defenders of the faith had the best of intentions. They were about the business of helping people to avoid unintentionally breaking the law of Moses, in this case from defiling themselves by eating with hands that may have touched some impure object or person. Since it was not always intention, but rather incident, that made one impure, to wash one's hands could insure that if you had become impure and did not know it, you would be OK to eat and not defile yourself and sin before God. You may remember the women who had been bleeding for fourteen years who touched just the fringe of Jesus' cloak and feared for her life because she had made him unclean in her desperation. On that occasion, Jesus was made "unclean," at least in the eyes of the authorities, not because of what he had done, but by what she had done to him. This cleanliness and purity thing was a very big deal, indeed from God's own mouth to Moses' ear.

The Scribes and Pharisees solution was to pull out their interpretive stain fighter and try to "Shout it out" of Jesus and the disciples and restore their system to purity and cleanliness. They felt justified in accusing this ragtag bunch of

violating the law and used shame dressed up as an innocent question: “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” They have asked, of course, the wrong question. A better question to ask, if indeed they were interested in protecting the disciples and God from impurity, would have been the open-ended question, “Are you clean before eating?” Rather, they assume that since the disciples have not abided by the proper traditions, that they are impure, and proceed right to the defense of their traditions, rather than the law itself. A better question still, and one not lost on James the brother of Jesus, would have been, “Have you helped any little old ladies across the street today?” for in the absence of a life lived for justice and mercy, we are all unclean and impure before God.

What wonderful words from the book of James, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” The Law the Jews loved so well was not only intended to keep the people pure before God, but right with each other, and indeed, the two cannot be separated. If you are not right with one another, you are not pure before God, and if you are not right before God, you cannot be right with one another. The impulse to reduce the Word of God to either of these two sides of the same coin is to fundamentally miss the point of the Law. Lest you think this only applies to an understanding of Jewish law, it also works with Jesus’ one sentence commentary on that same Law, prized so highly by the

Christian tradition: “Love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself.” One without the other not only simply will not do, but is impossible. And thus James exhortation to be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves,” and Jesus’ quote from Isaiah that “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” These scribes and Pharisees are not being criticized for their scruples, for their scruples were well-intentioned. They were being criticized for their scruples getting in the way of their Scripture. They were being criticized for being more concerned with the disciples’ hands than the disciples’ hearts.

You see, if this group of people charged with the leadership of the people of God cannot see its way clear to give its attention to what is really important, that is, the stuff inside a person which defiles, it has abdicated its responsibility. What Jesus is asking, in essence, is for them to be as concerned with the character of the person as with their cleanliness, as concerned with the “sins within” as the “sins without,” as concerned with the quality of justice and mercy extended to widows and orphans as the quantity of water used to wash away biological microbes and spiritual contagions. Were they ordinary people questioning the piety of the disciples, the scribes and Pharisees might not have been chastised so severely, but these were the leaders who were trusted by the people in their care, and Jesus cannot let the matter go unaddressed. It is not that the scribes and Pharisees have

gone “too far.” Rather, they have not gone “far enough.” They have failed to adequately care for those they claimed to represent.

As I said, the better question to have asked the disciples was on the order of “Before you eat, have you helped any little old ladies across the street?” a question which begins to get to the heart of the matter. You see, the list of sins with which Jesus concludes his lesson to the crowd who has witnessed these events is a list of sins that are sins among and between people as much as they are sins against God. And so, the better question is the one that asks if there is anything impure within that would prevent you from being clean before eating. Have you disciples tended to the widows and orphans in your community? Have you, Peter, conducted your fishing business with honesty and integrity? Have you, Judas, been keeping an accurate account of the treasury in your charge? Have any of you disciples kept the people who needed Jesus — the children, the crippled, the blind, the women — from coming to him for fear that they might steal his time away from you? These are the questions which the Pharisees should have asked for these are the questions related to what is impure within the human heart and what is acted out between people. And what’s more, have you sought forgiveness for your sins in addition to washing your hands?

If you are like most people in our society, you grew up being told to wash your hands before meals, a very appropriate and sanitary practice, though one now unrelated to the idea of ritual impurity and sin. Those of you who are parents of

children probably still carry on this tradition and dutifully provide antibacterial soaps for your little ones to wash away their grime, to “SHOUT It Out!” so to speak. But how many of you were asked, and how many ask today, whether or not your hearts, or the hearts of your children, were clean before eating, or for that matter, before doing anything? How many of us pause and ask forgiveness before we eat, that we may enjoy the blessings of God’s good earth with clean hearts and clear consciences? The one place you may actually do this is in church when we say the Prayer of Confession before we partake of the sacrament of the Lord’s supper, a practice which goes back to the days of persons being required to go to the confessional before being allowed to participate in the Mass. Though we Protestants have communalized the practice and have encouraged people to confess directly to God rather than to a priest, the impulse and the result are the same: to come before God with a clean heart before supping at the Lord’s table.

You don’t have to search very far for a conversation among Christians that doesn’t include the rather common lament about the role of television and Hollywood in influencing the decline of piety and religion in our countries. I’ve participated myself in my share of these conversations about the increasing amounts of gratuitous sex, violence, and indifference offered for sale on our movie screens, television sets, and radio dials. What is presented for our consumption is a veritable catalog of vices forced down the throats of children too young to discern and too often discouraged to question. Would that I could “SHOUT It Out” and

cleanse our entertainment industry of the stain of sin it offers. But I cannot, and I am therefore faced with a choice. I can choose to see myself and my religion as victims of a globalized media market. Or I can choose to take responsibility for myself and concentrate less on what goes into my body through my eyes and ears, but more on what comes out of it. Recall the words of Jesus in our passage from Matthew, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles.”

Do not misunderstand me. I believe strongly that we are a more violent society than ever before largely because of the influence of the media, because we witness murder, mayhem, and sexual deviance at a far greater rate in the media than exists in real life, because we have become desensitized to violence and degradation of persons for seeing so much of it. Its politics aside, Michael Moore’s Academy Award winning documentary on the gun culture, “Bowling for Columbine” offered some tasty food for thought about the links between the media and personal and societal violence.

But as much as I believe that our consumption of sin through the media makes us a more sinful people, I also believe more strongly that concentrating on the sins of the entertainment industry and not on ourselves is on the order of asking why the disciples have not washed their hands before eating instead of asking about their care of widows and orphans. Will it help us to have less gratuitous sex and violence on TV? Of course it will. But will it not help us more to change those things we can actually do something about, to be, in the words of James, “doers of

the word, and not just hearers who deceive themselves?” We deceive ourselves if we think the solution to our problems lies anywhere but within us, and in God’s power to change each of us. It is not what goes into us which defiles, but what comes out. Playing the victim, blaming those things outside your control, lamenting about our sad state of affairs is placing the emphasis on washing your hands of contagions you *might* have come in contact with. Taking responsibility for how you conduct your life, and how you pursue justice, and what kind of Christian witness you offer to your children is to address the issue of purity, cleanliness, and true religion where it truly lies. Let me say that again: Taking responsibility for how you conduct your life, and how you pursue justice, and what kind of Christian witness you offer to your children is to address the issue of purity, cleanliness, and true religion where it truly lies.

Let me send you home with a little way for you to practice what I preach! The next time you wash your hands before eating, I invite you to begin the practice of asking what you can wash from your heart as well as from your hands. As you stand in front of that mirror, take a good look at yourself and ask how you might faithfully live as someone who is a doer of the word and merely a hearer, as someone whose outer life reflects their inner life, as someone whose actions are “religion that is pure and undefiled before God, that is, to care for orphans and widows in their distress” a great metaphor for caring for one another and living justly, and “to keep oneself unstained by the world;” to SHOUT out of yourself

those things that defile. Know that is God's will and Christ's passion that you do these things, and in them we will find life abundant, and Hollywood will take care of itself. Amen.