

"Why," the Scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus, "do your disciples eat without washing their hands?" Why, indeed, we might well ask. "Supper's ready!" I remember my mother calling up the stairs. "Wash your hands hand come to the table!" And my sisters and I would converge on the bathroom sink to wash our hands before going downstairs for supper.

I remember, too, a Peanuts cartoon from years ago, where Charlie Brown and his little sister Sally have just washed their hands for dinner. Then Charlie Brown stoops down to give Snoopy a pat on the head, saying, "I have to go to dinner now, Snoopy" – at which point his sister pipes up, "And you have to wash your hands again because you touched the dog!" At that, Snoopy's ears stand straight up: "Touched the dog? *Touched the dog!?! Good grief!*" And he goes after her: "Here comes the bearer of filth and pestilence! Here comes the walking bubonic plague!" "Stay away from me!" Sally shrieks. "My hands are clean!!!"

Of course one should wash up before eating, although touching the dog is surely no big deal. I just can't get concerned about "dog germs" – generally speaking, dogs don't get our illnesses and we don't get theirs. It's germs from *other humans* you have to worry about, and it's from *them* you're likely to catch something – which is why we are rightly told to clean our hands repeatedly in a hospital. And that's why we here at St. Paul's have hand cleaner dispensers placed strategically around the church, and I encourage you to use them – especially before eating and drinking at coffee hour.

So why didn't Jesus tell his disciples that the Scribes and Pharisees were right for once, and to smarten up and wash their hands before eating? I've heard it said that although no one had any knowledge of germs until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, God of course knew all about them all along, and so God protected his chosen people with laws about cleanliness.

Same thing with the prohibition of eating pork – God knew all along about trichinosis borne by undercooked pork, and so, it is claimed, protected the Jews from this by designating pigs as "unclean".

Sorry, but I don't buy that kind of thing.

It's just modern back-construction by Biblical Literalists who think they have to defend the Bible's truth by showing somehow that scientific discoveries are accounted for in it. Since these ancient texts are the Word of God, who is all-knowing, all-seeing, all powerful, they think all new scientific truth somehow must be anticipated and prefigured in them. Look, germs just weren't the issue, either explicitly or implicitly. Neither Jesus in his 1<sup>st</sup> century humanity nor his opponents knew anything about them. This is theology, not microbiology. The real issue at play was purity – purity before God – and what that really means or doesn't mean, and who has it and who doesn't.

The Old Testament doesn't actually say anything about washing one's hands before eating – or one's dishes or pots or pans or utensils. This was rather the later teaching of the rabbis – oral tradition, extrapolation from the purity laws concerning ritual purification, clean and unclean foods, and so on, that *are* there. Now, it was one thing for priests in the Temple, who had all the time in the world and the assistance of servants to maintain conditions for practicing the most exacting ritual purity, to have a ready supply of specially blessed water on hand for such things. It was quite another for ordinary working people, such as Jesus and his disciples, who did not, after all, have running water in their houses – to say nothing of the poor. I daresay that when we ourselves go camping, and are limited to using a washbasin with cold water we've had to haul in ourselves, we don't wash our hands as often as we do at home and have considerably more dirt under our fingernails.

So the level of cleanliness the Scribes and Pharisees were calling for, like the level of cleanliness we are accustomed to, was a luxury. Now, luxury is not evil in itself, but here they made it a rule for holiness before God – a rule no one else could keep, so it became a barrier for the vast majority of the people. And then they put it in God’s mouth. What that did, in effect, was to ascribe to themselves a level of holiness above everyone else. Jesus saw right through this, and quoted the prophet Isaiah to accuse them of paying lip service to God while really being very, very far away in heart – “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” and “neglecting the commandment of God to maintain the tradition of men” – and undoing the Law’s real intent.

That this is exactly what Jesus meant about the hand washing issue is shown by his follow-up accusation concerning their provision for exemption from the commandment to honour one’s parents, including supporting them materially if necessary. Just declare your wealth to be given over to God (through the Temple, of course), which is obviously, they claimed, a much higher cause. Then you really are not permitted to do anything for your parents at all because any money you spent on them would be taken away from God.

There is most assuredly nothing like this in the Old Testament, but it helped keep the money flowing into the Temple treasury! “Thus by your own tradition”, Jesus told them, “you make God’s word null and void. “ And many such things you do.” So this is a pattern of theirs: lip service to God, with the heart far, far away; false devotion to God serving as a smokescreen for another agenda. This will not do at all.

Jesus summed up for the crowd gathered around him: “Listen to me, all of you, and understand this: nothing that goes into you from outside can defile you. “ No, it is the things that come out of you that defile you.” And then further, to the disciples this time, “Nothing you eat can defile you, since it enters not the heart but the stomach and so passes out into the drain.”

Mark editorializes here: “Thus he declared all foods clean.” Note that Jesus didn’t actually say that, although that would logically follow from what he did say and so he would seem to be clearly implying that. Mark’s editorializing shows the early church recalling Jesus’ teaching in support of its rejection of kosher food laws stemming from its acceptance and admission of Gentiles. It was grounding a novel and controversial practice, and behind it the understanding that adherence to Jesus Christ in faith must stand on its own apart from observance of the Jewish Law, in the recalled words of Jesus himself, extended into the situation of the church.

To us it all seems so obvious and commonsensical. But we dare not regard the Jesus’ opponents smugly for their legalism, for they had no monopoly on it. The church, too, has a long history of “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” Why are behaviours or values that are really historically and culturally determined repeatedly deemed “Christian behaviour” or “Christian values” by contemporary Christians?

For example, when alcoholic beverages were considered – not entirely without grounds, of course – to be a great social evil that needed to be stamped out, the churches were full of temperance activists and preachers thundered from the pulpits on the evils of drink. Did they really think that was preaching the gospel? Those who secretly continued to enjoy a glass of wine, a pint of beer or a shot of scotch notwithstanding were left with the choice of feeling guilty, perhaps even thinking they were damned – or cynically rejecting the faith, perhaps even as they continued to attend church as a social obligation. But the evils of alcohol abuse needed to be considered and addressed in themselves, rather than all alcohol use being simplistically denounced by a Christianity distorted by a temperance straitjacket. To put it another way, does the human righteousness before God revealed in Jesus Christ and lived out in union with him really consist in refraining from drinking alcohol? If it doesn’t, then our church in those days was preaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

Related to this, I think, is the sort of “Christian” morality, so-called, which holds that Christians don’t smoke, drink, or swear, let alone smoke pot or stray from the ideal of chastity outside of marriage. I’m not saying these things are all really OK after all and Christians should just cut loose. Far from it.

But they need to be evaluated ethically in light of God’s love for us all in Jesus Christ. Are they consistent, or inconsistent, with our wholeness of life before God in Jesus Christ? Even if their consistency is found to be threadbare, let’s say, at best, are they so radically inconsistent as to cut us off from any real participation in Jesus Christ, any real unity of heart with him? That is the one valid, ultimate criterion. If we can’t really defend a “yes” answer to *that*, if they *don’t* cut us off from Christ in that way, then they cannot be determinative of our standing before God, can they? And we discover that this so-called Christian morality is putting us in danger of teaching human commandments as doctrines.

There is also abroad the notion that to be a real Christian as opposed to merely a cultural one you need to pray a certain prayer asking Jesus into your heart or that you must be born again in the sense of a conversion experience something like Paul’s on the road to Damascus. But not everyone in the Church Catholic uses this kind of language, or finds these concepts meaningful or descriptive of their own experience of God’s presence, God’s love, God’s call.

I know I don’t. And I’m attacking this because it hurts people, and because it misrepresents and distorts the Christian faith. Legalisms exclude those who don’t fit the mould, and I think that exclusion is very often the motivation for them. Legalism seems to fallen human beings, to sinners, as the easiest and most natural path to salvation. Draw a line in the sand with yourself already on the bright side and others in the shadows – or one that you yourself and those who see things like you do can step over into the light readily enough.

And if it’s a matter of *personal decision* to step over it, so much the better, because then those who are to be condemned for their failure to do so have no one to blame but themselves. But legalism is, in reality, anything *but* the path to salvation. For drawing lines like that is what the Scribes and Pharisees were doing, wasn’t it? And Jesus, in whom we are saved if we are to be saved at all, was having no part of it.

We need to be clear that being a Christian means confessing the truth that Jesus is Lord of our lives and indeed of the entire world. Our righteousness before God is in Christ, not in ourselves. That is to say that our righteousness before God is a function of our personal, free, everyday participation, through faith, in Christ’s real love for his beloved. It is *not* a function of our relative goodness as determined by our adherence to moral criteria outside of him, to moral or religious or any other laws supposedly standing independently of him.

Now, it is true that laws and behavioural rules can point us toward Christ by restraining us from evil. Sometimes they can even function like therapy for sinners like us by getting our hands and feet, then hearts and minds *moving* in the way of Jesus, and we then pick it up and go with it. But here, observe, we are *evaluating* them according to how they direct us toward Christ or away from him – not treating them as being of value in and of themselves without reference to him.

For Jesus, in his real *love* for me and for you, \_\_\_\_\_, (and for you, \_\_\_\_\_, and you... , and every last one of us), is *the* representation in human form of God’s own eternal, divine being and activity, the one reality that finally matters and *cannot* ultimately be ignored or obscured.

So while it can seem so *easy*, so *natural*, and so much *simpler* just to draw a line in the sand and step over it, human life is *so* much more complicated than that – and God, bless him, loves it, and in Jesus Christ, loves it a whole lot more than we do. And that ultimate reality, always pressing upon us, is why, in Jesus Christ, legalism just won’t do! Amen.