



First Lutheran Church

Gospel of Matthew

Summer 2026 Reading Challenge



Deep Dive: Things that defile

Talking to the Kids

We teach our children to wash their hands from a very early age. And yet, we still have a need to see signs posted in bathrooms that read something like "employees must wash their hands". Do employees really not remember what their mother's taught them? Or is this to help assure the public that proper hand washing is happening?

Jesus' disciples do wash their hands for hygiene, it should be pointed out that the story beginning in Matthew 15:1 is not about improper handwashing. But there was a tradition about washing hands that was about being holy in the presence of God, this was a ceremonial cleansing. And sometimes Jesus and the disciples were out on the road munching on a snack and didn't do the traditional cleansing of their hands. But what makes you close to God is not how you ritually clean your hands -- it is how you live your whole life. So, yes, kids, Jesus wants you to wash your hands at all times and live a clean life.

Week 8: Matthew chapters 15 and 16

- Chapter 15 starts with a conflict story. The Pharisees and teachers of the law have been watching Jesus and his disciples and they have a clash over what they observe. Now this story isn't about the Pharisees and teachers of the law being clearly the bad guys and Jesus and his disciples being clearly the good guys. Something much deeper is happening in this story.
- For starters, the story is about how one is considered "clean" or "holy" to be in community or in the presence of God. The age old question is how am I in right standing with God, and the age old answer is -- well, follow the law. But following the law is not so simple. Following the law leads to questions, like how do I follow this law if that law says something completely different?
- Here we are washing hands -- not for hygiene, but for the sake of cleanliness. Think about the old adage "cleanliness is next to godliness". And we want the outer appearance of the body to be clean so we can show others we are clean before God. So over the centuries of ancient Jewish thought, the outward appearance became very important and a very visible sign of our cleanliness, or our ability to stand rightly in God's presence.
- What Jesus does is flip the script a little. Jesus points out that we are always interpreting the law of God to our personal advantage. It is to our personal advantage that we outwardly look clean to others, so they can believe we are clean to God. And yet, the outward appearance really isn't anything but a facade, Jesus says. Tradition became overly important and we forgot the true meaning of standing right before God. Take the example Jesus cites. We are to honor our mother and father, according to the law. But if we do not have money to support them, because we have given that money to God, we are released from our obligations to support our parents, after all God comes even before Mommy and Daddy.
- Jesus is not saying we shouldn't give money to God at all; Jesus isn't saying we take care of our parents to our own financial ruin. Jesus is saying how we interpret the law of God should not just be about our personal advantage. It should be about how we are honoring the right standing we have with God already.
- So, with hand washing -- Jesus reminds us it isn't by eating with dirty hands that we defile ourselves. We defile ourselves with what comes out. Matthew, following the lead of Mark who also tells this story, shortens the list of what comes from the heart to defile us from 13 to 8 items, these items reflect a "vice catalogue" that was developing across early Christian teachings and was being adopted from Hellenistic (Greek) culture and Jewish culture.
- In the end, this is about the fact that we always interpret the law. There is no such thing as the law of God clearly says "this" or "that". And how we interpret the law matters, it matters if we are using it to shame or using it to restore others to right living with God.

Gathered by God, we live our faith with: Compassion, Grace, Gratitude, and Joy

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