

Matthew 15:15-20

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Peter asks Jesus to explain what He meant when He told the crowd “It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.” Apparently this thought challenged Peter’s assumptions of wickedness and righteousness. Jesus corrects Peter’s wrong assumption by explaining how wickedness is primarily an issue stemming from the heart.

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Mark 7:17-23.

After *Jesus* addressed the disciples’ concern about His offending the Pharisees, *Peter* asked *Him* to “*Explain the parable to us.*” The *parable* that *Peter* wanted *Jesus* to explain was His recent explanation to the crowds about what makes a man unclean.

Jesus told the crowds “It is not what enters *into the mouth* that defiles *the man*, but what proceeds *out of the mouth*, this defiles *the man*” (Matthew 15:11). He gave this *parable* in response to the Pharisees accusation against the disciples’ habit of not washing their *hands* before eating bread (Matthew 15:2).

The Pharisees believed that righteousness was fundamentally external. A man’s righteousness was ultimately defined by his outward actions or the rituals he performed. They believed that a man’s actions alone determined a man’s righteousness or wickedness. Among the things that the Pharisees’ traditions espoused was that *to eat with unwashed hands defiled a man*.

The Pharisees used a legalistic framework when interpreting God’s commandments and missed *the heart* of the matter. Technical compliance along with clever self-justifications was how they understood righteousness. This was the opposite of what *Jesus* taught in His Sermon on the Mount. In it *Jesus* repeatedly showed how bare technical compliance without an obedient heart was a hollow righteousness and did not make one right with God (Matthew 5:21-22; 5:27-28; 5:31-32; 5:33-37; 5:38-42; 5:43-45). True righteousness came from the inside out.

The Pharisees believed righteousness came from the outside in. *Peter* too, seemed to be adhere to this false presupposition. And his request of *Jesus* to explain His *parable* reveals he was struggling to unlearn his false view.

When *Peter* asked *Jesus* to explain the parable, his Teacher appeared to be amazed at his disciple’s hard headedness. (*Peter* means “rock” and was Simon’s nickname). *Are you still lacking in understanding also?* He wished to supplant this deeply rooted lie from *Peter*’s thinking. And so, He asked another question to locate and establish a clear starting point. *Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated?*

He was explaining how it was not food which *goes* inside a *man* through his *mouth* and *into* his *stomach* that defiles a *man*. These material *things* are digested, then *eliminated*. *Jesus* appears to bring in a quite earthy example to try to get Peter to see the point. “What you put in your mouth ends up coming out as poop.” Everyone poops, and that does not *defile a man*. It is part of the natural body function. What defiles a *man* is not poop coming out of his bottom, it is foul and destructive words coming *out of his mouth*, such as lies and slander.

It is *the things that proceed out of the mouth* that originate and come from the heart. *Those are the things that defile a man*. *The things that proceed out of a man’s mouth* are words. Words are the expression of a man’s *thoughts* and desires. A man’s statements and *the things* he says, can often reveal the true nature of a man’s *heart*. It is the *heart*, not the digestive tract that is the seat of righteousness.

“...For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil.”
(Matthew 12:34b-35)

Jesus continued explaining to *Peter* about the proceedings of *the heart*. His assessment reveals a depraved glimpse into human nature. *For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders*. He *said* this to show that it is not the external actions that pollute a *heart* and *defile* a man. Rather these actions are the outpouring effects of *evil*. The root cause and source of a man’s depravity comes *from* within his own *heart*.

A *man* becomes defiled when his heart prompts him to do these (and other sins). *Jesus* confirms *these are the things which defile the man*, before he reiterates *but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man*.

Biblical Text

15:15-20 Peter said to Him, “Explain the parable to us.” Jesus said, “Are you still lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.”