

Proper 15 A
St. Matthew 15:10-28
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St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Words

"Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

At my day job I have been taught to sanitize my hands as often as possible, at least after every contact with a client. We use an alcohol based cleaner and it is supposed to kill 99% of all germs. There was a time in my life when I did not do this. However, now I find myself scrubbing up even in my private life. But do clean hands prevent anything more than being on the receiving end of a spreading germ? Can I wash away my own negativity when I am having a bad day? Will alcohol hand cleaners cleanse the dark things that weigh on your heart? Can I really feel as though I am a clean person?

What Jesus is trying to teach us today is that real cleanliness is in our hearts and not our hands. No matter how many times we wash our hands, no matter how many times we clean our homes, it does not mean we have cleaned our hearts.

Albert Einstein once said, *"If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?"* Indeed, while it has often been said, *"Cleanliness is next to Godliness,"* I suspect that refers to a clean heart, and not a clean house or desk. A clean desk and a clean home may represent a home that is ready to receive guests, but it does not indicate godliness, nor a clean heart within us. You can be externally

quite clean and internally quite filthy, can't you? To recall the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew: "*For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person...*"

What Jesus is trying to say, is that all the concern over cleanliness laws is irrelevant if you are not clean in your heart. It simply does not matter, nor does it make one's heart truly clean. It is an external concern. What we place in our mouths will not "*defile*" us, and is not relevant to what comes out of our mouths. There is absolutely no connection between what we eat and what we say.

How we live makes all the difference in what comes out of our mouths.

I was raised with the value that cleanliness is next to Godliness. I have always loved a clean home and a clean, orderly home makes me feel comfortable. But while cleanliness may make me feel comfortable through some Freudian machinations, that comfort level belies what may be going on in my heart if I harbor hatred for my neighbor or am angry about some perceived slight.

Out of the mouth the abundance of the heart speaks. Psalm 51 speaks to the core of this issue:

Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise: Good News and not bad news; truth and not lies; true witness and not false witness; blessings and not curses. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within in me." Let that spirit be a Christian one, of faith, hope, kindness, generosity, magnanimity, compassion, empathy, mercy, forgiveness, justice, Peace, and love. Let my heart be free from the weight of my sin, from selfishness and self concern

and let it be filled with your love and full of love for others because it is loved!

So, the most helpful and hurtful things can emanate from our mouths. Which do you think Christians should try to have emanate from theirs? Is it not better to speak positive words? Is it so hard to find something positive to say? Is it not better to speak lovingly and to let words of love come from inside us rather than the sharp sword of criticism or the spear of hatred?

In fact, is it not better to say something good, positive, and if you have nothing to add in this vein, is it not best to remain silent?

Speaking of remaining silent if you have nothing good to say, James in his Epistle admonishes us in one of my favorite sayings from the Bible, [James 1:19] *“Be quick to listen and slow to speak.”* These are wise words for anyone in the helping professions, especially mine. The Psalm is a wise one which says, *“For God alone my soul in silence waits.”* Silence is always wise. We do not need to add anything to the conversation if we have nothing wise or good to add. We do not simply need to hear our own voices expounding, nor do others. Silence is sometimes golden, though a good heart does not remain silent in the face of evil, injustice, hatred, or unkindness.

Think how much more you can add by leaving a positive word or a smile. Be of good humor when you can.

Is it not so true that we know a tree by its fruits? Do we not know a person by the fruit that proceeds from their mouth?

We do not always realize the impact of our words, but they can touch and change lives. A kind word can make all the difference in a day where you wander in a forest of criticism. For a thirsty soul, such a word of kindness is like a cup of cold

water when you are parched. People who are able to do this are a blessing to others. They are not mere flatterers, who pass along compliments for personal gain. They are sincere in their compliments and their words ring genuine to the listener and the person on the receiving end of them. With hearts fixed on loving others, they find the good in even difficult places and people, and they give voice to it. That voice gives hope to the world in which they live. As Christians, we are called to speak kind words in love to others.

Those who genuinely speak well of others can do so because they have good hearts, loving hearts and they are therefore able to know good in others when they recognize it. The words come back to my mind again, words which we are to utter in prayer each morning, "*Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me.*" (See the daily devotions for individuals and families, for "in the Morning" on page 137 of the Book of Common Prayer.) This prayer, if you use it each day, will help set your mind right on the words which ought to come from your mouth.

Both the Apostles James and John remind us that our words must not be empty, but must carry with them positive action that embodies love: (From I John 3:18) "*Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*" (and from James 2:15-17:) "*If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*" Enough said: we are cautioned to put flesh on those bare bones of words, and not to think our job is done with a mere platitude. Yet words still have power, and positive, loving, hopeful, and healing words are not to be underestimated, and are not heard enough in our lives today.

"Sticks and stone may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." The old playground chant is not really true. Words have great power, and that power can be misused to hurt others. Words are the cause of much domestic abuse. They start fights and wars. We underestimate their power to hurt, destroy and divide, as we also underestimate the power they have to do good and truly bless others. They can also unite and express love and bring peace.

As Matthew said: *"Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart"* ...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be always acceptable in your sight O Lord. AMEN