

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

B. THE AMBASSADOR.

13. Squeaky Clean?

Matthew 15:1-20, Mark 7:1-22. Back in first-century Palestine the grapevine worked well. Down in Jerusalem news of Jesus' radical teachings filtered through to the Pharisees and Scribes (teachers of the law), who hastened to fulfil their duty by checking him out for possible heresy. Arriving in Capernaum they gathered around Jesus and noticed his disciples eating with "unclean" hands. They were scandalized. We could be, too, for to modern civilised people hygiene is important.

But Mark explains for us that this was not a case of hygiene – it was a case of religion, a religion where the Law of God had been devalued into petty and meaningless rules. The Pharisees – and any Jews who considered themselves devout – coming home from the marketplace, would fear lest they had accidentally become "unclean" through some contact with non-religious Jews or, even worse, Gentiles. Before eating a meal they would give their hands a ceremonial wash according to the strict rules laid down in the oral law. Edersheim in "The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah"¹ gives some details of this ritual. The minimum amount of water to be used was defined as enough to fill one-and-a-half egg-shells. It had to be poured on both hands, with the fingers pointed upwards: it must drop off the wrist and not run back down the washed hands, for that water would now be unclean and would make the hands unclean again. The process had to be repeated with the hands held down and then each hand had to be cleansed by being rubbed with the fist of the other. A really strict Jew would do all this not only before the meal, but between courses as well. Truly!

Back in Leviticus, in the days when Moses was leading the newly-freed race of Israel through the desert, God gave them certain rules of hygiene which, when observed, kept them in remarkably good health – actually in fulfilment of His promise in **Exodus 15:26** – "If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His eyes I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you." **Leviticus 14:1-9** for instance, states that anyone recovering from an infectious disease, had to stay outside the camp for 7 days to ensure the disease had really gone, and then he had to wash himself and his clothes and shave off all his hair including beard and eyebrows, before he could be pronounced clean. We might wonder if his wife would welcome him happily or run screaming from this scary stranger? The people in general were expected to keep sensible rules of hygiene in daily life.

God's laws regarding food were similarly sensible and hygienic. For instance, carrion-eating birds and carnivorous animals could carry disease from the animals they had eaten, as could shellfish, which are bottom-feeders devouring the ocean's "rubbish." The pig, (an unclean feeder), rabbit and hare are liable to parasitic infections such as trichina and tapeworm, and animals that died a natural death could have been suffering some disease. All these were forbidden. Under the settled conditions of Palestine some of the rules could have been relaxed, but after the Babylonian captivity, the Jewish people held fiercely to their laws as perpetuating their national identity. Rabbis began making meticulous rules and regulations governing daily life and these interpretations and applications of the Law of Moses were handed down from generation to generation. Roman occupation reinforced Jewish loyalty to their heritage, noticeable particularly in Galilee where Jew and Gentile mixed. In Jesus' day this "tradition of the elders" was still in oral form and it was not until around AD 200 that it was put into writing in the Mishnah. Hence Jesus' words again and again in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it has been *said* ..." as opposed to the written law of God.

Of course, the law of God had a far greater purpose than keeping His people clean. It was for them to learn how much God loved them, that He was a holy God who could not be trifled with and that they were a special people consecrated to Him. It was wrong that the petty interpretations of rabbis should be regarded as binding as the Ten Commandments, and Jesus pointed this out to the Pharisees who asked him why his disciples didn't abide by strict cleansing rules. In **Matthew 15:39** he turned the tables on them by accusing them of breaking the 5th commandment: instead of honouring their mother and father, they could escape

their responsibility of care by pretending to devote all that money to the Lord. While punctilious in keeping a thousand petty rules and regulations, they had missed the point: the whole basis of God's law for His people was love – His love for them awakening a responding love for Him.

This offended the Pharisees of course, but Jesus summed it up for the crowd by impressing on them that no grain of dirt ingested because of unwashed hands could affect a person's moral cleanness: what came out of the mouth was the evidence of an unclean heart – evil thoughts such as murder, adultery, theft, slander – engendered by a lack of love for God and His law of love.

It seems obvious to us today, but in how many churches do you know of petty rules that have ruined the chances of some person coming to know God for themselves? Gandhi once went seeking to a church, but was treated as a second-class citizen and did not pursue his quest. How open are we to accepting people who violate our own standards of conduct, or customs made sacred by force of habit? It is a solemn thought that we will be held accountable for our parochial prejudices on the day of judgement.

Faith stretched out.

Matthew 15:21-28. Beleaguered by the pestilential Pharisees, Jesus sought out some peace and quiet, not just for himself but for the sake of his disciples who needed a great deal more teaching before he could hand over the reins of his earthly ministry. They travelled north to the Phoenician territory of Tyre and Sidon; here he would be less known and allowed some respite. But not for long. A local woman had somehow heard of Jesus, and she had heard enough to light a spark of faith in her heart, faith that erupted into desperate action on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter. She ran to Jesus with the cry, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" It would seem strange that Jesus did not answer her straight away: by using the Messianic name "Son of David" she was presuming a claim on him that did not then apply to Gentiles. She saw him just as a political figure and so had no right to ask him for favours. When the heartless disciples urged him to send her away, his answer was that he was sent first to Israel.

Yet Jesus did not send her away. Instead he drew her on, stretching her incomplete faith until she knelt in submission before him and called him "Lord." In the dialogue that followed, more than one commentator has seen a wry humour. We are inclined to think of Jesus as perpetually serious and solemn: remember that he was full of the Holy Spirit, and the second fruit of the Spirit listed in **Galatians 5:22** is joy. Jesus was full of joy, a joy that welled up in spite of outward circumstances and overflowed into his speech and actions. Did Jesus laugh? Of course he did! Would little children have run happily to him if he had been nothing but a sober-sides? There could well have been a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face as he talked about the household pet dogs (the meaning of the Greek word "kunaria") as distinct from the half-savage scavengers that roamed the countryside and were equated in Jewish minds with Gentiles. And the woman understood that well enough to give him a witty retort. Jesus gave her the ultimate accolade when he said, "You have great faith!" It was a faith on which he was glad to act, and her daughter was healed.

While Jesus declares, "Ask, and you will receive," he does not allow us to take him for granted. We must come humbly with our petition, believing that he knows better than we do what is the right answer. Sometimes his delay is so that our faith will be stretched and strengthened for the next time round. We need to persist – not in demanding, but in trusting – and so have the blessing of learning more of his love.

Four Thousand Feast.

Matthew 15:29-39. Jesus then travelled southeast back to Lake Galilee, but this time he went on to the eastern side, to the despised, mostly Gentile region of Decapolis. Back in Study 8 we saw that the demoniac whom Jesus healed, had asked to come with him and that Jesus had asked him instead to go home and tell his own folk what God had done for him. The healed demoniac must have done his work well, for this time, instead of being asked to leave, Jesus was given a right royal welcome with "great crowds" bringing their sick

to be healed. The people were absolutely amazed at Jesus' miracles and **verse 31** tells us "they praised the God of Israel" – a phrase obviously coming from Gentile lips.

Back when the 5,000 were fed we see in **Mark 6:34** Jesus' compassion for his countrymen: now we see that same compassion extended to the Gentiles. He really cared about their empty tummies! His disciples did not rise to the occasion: where would they buy enough bread to feed this mob? Of course, they could see the obvious complication: in this Gentile territory where would they find enough "clean" bread – bread that had not been contaminated by being baked by Gentile hands, to feed even themselves, let alone anyone else!

Jesus was not perturbed; he asked how many loaves they had brought with them. The total came to 7 loaves and a few small fish. That was enough. And here is a beautiful and significant picture. The bread which had been baked strictly according to Jewish rituals, was now made available to Gentile stomachs! And we wonder how much "ritual washing" was carried out on their hands? Yes, Jesus did indeed come to his own people first, but there was such an abundance of his love that it could overflow to the whole world.

We should never forget how much we owe to the Jewish nation. Laws of the highest ethical and moral standards, the incomparable story of God at work in the lives of men, the reassurance of fulfilled prophecy, the faithful preservation of the Old Testament, the living word of God – these are the foundation stones on which we build our Christian heritage. It should be our prayer that God's chosen people should all come to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah and enjoy the full blessings God has planned for them.

Strange Bedfellows.

Matthew 16:1-12. It seems here that Jesus and his disciples were back on the western, Jewish side of Galilee. In Verses 1-4 the depth of the growing hostility towards Jesus is shown by the amazing fact that 2 such opposite groups as the Pharisees and the Sadducees joined forces against him. Their differences are outlined below:-

Pharisees	Sadducees
Strict observers of every detail of the Law	Rejected the oral and scribal law, only accepted the written Scriptures as law
Believed in angels and resurrection of the body	No belief in angels or resurrection
No interest in politics: only wanted to be left in peace to observe their religious life	Small group, wealthy, influential in government, collaborating with Romans for gain
Looked and longed for the Messiah	Did not look for a messiah
Dominant in Galilee	Dominant in Jerusalem

One was religious and the other worldly; their common error was their hostility to Jesus.

“None so blind as those who don’t want to see.” The Gospel texts have been subjected to a deeper level of critical analysis than has been given to any other ancient document, yet the evidence of their authenticity is staggering. People blindly believe the ads on TV, which are designed to take their money, yet cannot accept the truths about Jesus which could bring them eternal life! Jesus was quick to point out to his protagonists that they could very easily discern the signs of the sky, while being unwilling to interpret the signs of the times.

It is significant that he reminded them of Jonah – a Jew who could not stomach the thought that Gentiles were actually capable of repenting and being accepted by God, yet who humbled himself and obeyed God at last, preaching to Nineveh so that they could believe and avoid judgement. The Pharisees and Sadducees were being confronted by a greater prophet than Jonah, for Jesus Christ was God’s last word. Jesus only responded to the genuine enquirers: for those who refused to believe he warned of nothing but judgement. And his judgement was fearful – he simply left them to their unbelief.

Verses 5-12. Once more they crossed the lake and this time the disciples had forgotten to take some bread with them. It seems they were so human-centred, so pre-occupied with their physical need, that they could not assimilate Christ’s teaching on spiritual truth. There were 2 lessons they had not learnt: on the physical level, they couldn’t trust God to supply their needs, even after being part of the 2 great miracles where Jesus fed the multitudes with so little. All they could think of was the actual leaven, a little piece of fermented dough which was added to the new dough to make it rise and ready to bake. Now, because they hadn’t brought bread with them, they would have to buy it when they landed at the other side of the lake and were back in Gentile territory. But no orthodox Jew could eat bread baked or even touched by a Gentile, so they thought Jesus was warning them not to buy bread from the Gentiles with its defiling leaven in it! This was the second lesson they had not learnt, that (in the previous chapter) Jesus had shown them he had come to break down the barrier between Jew and Gentile. He told them to stop fussing and worrying about trifles, whether it was the physical need of bread or the religious fastidiousness of keeping every ceremonial law.

Leaven was the Jewish symbol of evil, so what “leaven” was Jesus warning them against in the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees? From the table above, we can deduce that on the one hand, it would be in calling legalism “religion”, with outward rectitude but inner sinfulness, and on the other hand, it would be materialism and cynicism. In both cases, it was a lack of love for God.

St. Augustine of Hippo is reported to have said, “Love God, and do what you like,” as a fair assessment of a right relationship with God. Would you agree?

Jesus under Pressure.

We see from this study how often Jesus had come under pressure, but actually his whole life was lived under a pressure that we ourselves could never have endured. Even at the age of 12, Jesus as a perfect son had to fulfil the demands of both his earthly parents and his Heavenly Father. Beginning his ministry at around the age of 30, Jesus would have offended his brothers who would have expected him, as the eldest son, to have married, settled down into his late father’s business and taken over the responsibility of caring for his mother. But whatever it cost him, Jesus had to break those family ties for the good of the whole world: and he wasn’t given the time to grieve for his beloved cousin John. Even his childhood friends at Nazareth tried to toss him down a cliff and he raised the ire of the religious leaders in Jerusalem as he in righteous anger cleansed the Temple of their corruption.

As an itinerant preacher, Jesus had no permanent home, no regular income, no social standing. He depended on the charity of well-wishers towards a rabbi and the hospitality of friends. **Luke 8:2,3** records that beside his 12 close disciples, some women to whom he had administered healing, followed along with the little company, and supported them out of their own means: Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus had rid of 7 demons – well-off, but *nowhere* do we read that she was a prostitute - (with 7 demons at bay, how many customers would she have had?) Joanna the wife of Cuza, manager of Herod’s household –

independent, wealthy and perhaps able to warn Jesus of Herod's agenda; and the otherwise unknown Susanna. Jesus lived a rugged, outdoor life and was responsible for the welfare of his little band.

On top of that was the constant sniping of the Pharisees at any miracle that Jesus carried out on the Sabbath. **John chapter 8** lists some of their accusations: he was not from God, he was demon-possessed, he was illegitimate, he was a sinner, he was a Samaritan, he was mad, and they sought to kill him – all because his love had overflowed to someone in need.

Yet in spite of it all, Jesus never lost his cool. He calmly and logically argued with the Pharisees, never seeking retribution, and never showing any impatience with the demands of the needy. There is a delightful cameo in **Mark 8:22-26** where some people brought a blind man to Jesus, begging him to heal him. We wonder why Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village – except that verse 22 would indicate that the man had very little faith to ask for help himself and perhaps during that walk, with Jesus' hand firmly holding his and gracious words falling from his lips, the spark of faith was ignited into hope. Perhaps the healing in private was needed to save the man embarrassment. It sounds funny that Jesus spat on the man's eyes – except again that saliva was regarded as an effective curative and once again Jesus may have been helping his faith by using a method the man would have already trusted. Even then, the cure seemed incomplete and Jesus, without any condemnation, had to once more touch the blind man's eyes before he was completely restored.

Dear Jesus, in the midst of such a demanding life, had love enough to take the time and effort to suit his curing to the needs of one individual. Pressure? Yes, enormous pressure. Stressed out? No, just serenely strong as he trusted his Father minute-by-minute to enable him to carry out His will. Wrapped up as Jesus was in the love of his Father, he was free to give out that love to us, the least-deserving of his creatures. We are all precious individuals to him. How can we do less than love him back?

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, orig.1883: 2018 edition, Sharpe Books