

**Frankly, Guys, I Don't Give a Damn**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
August 20, 2017

**Scriptures:**

Matthew 15:1-20 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup>“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” <sup>3</sup>He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup>For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ <sup>5</sup>But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. <sup>6</sup>So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. <sup>7</sup>You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

<sup>8</sup>This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;  
<sup>9</sup>in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

<sup>10</sup>Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: <sup>11</sup>it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”

<sup>12</sup>Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” <sup>13</sup>He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. <sup>14</sup>Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” <sup>15</sup>But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.”

<sup>16</sup>Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? <sup>17</sup>Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? <sup>18</sup>But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. <sup>19</sup>For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. <sup>20</sup>These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

**Sermon:**

As always, understanding the original contexts of scripture helps us give it the proper relevance for our lives.

Today Jesus is speaking about Jewish matters to Jewish peasants, who form the backdrop of the crowd, as he engages a group of Pharisees and Scribes. Matthew, writes primarily to an urban Jewish, Jesus-believing audience recalling Jesus’ teachings on one of the three ablutions, or traditional ceremonial washings of the Jews, and the Mosaic Laws or Ten Commandments.

Also, let us see today’s text within the context of the Ancient Near Eastern honor-shame model of social interaction. Any question put forward in a public setting as we see today is always an honor challenge. Jesus could have deemed these Pharisees and religious lawyers unworthy of an answer and ignored them. However, the crowd, the court of final approval in matters of honor, would have seen it differently; therefore, in his riposte, Jesus lays down a counter challenge, which then puts the Pharisees on the honor hot-seat.

Now lest we think the Pharisees were just a class of religious snobs, although some were, they were not, and their thinking in general went something like this: the Babylonian Exile and the destruction of the First Temple were seen as the results of the ruling elite’s, the priests’, and the monarchy’s violating the Mosaic Laws and breaking faith with God. So, during the Exile, when there

was little to no monarch at play and the exiled temple priests were fairly impotent, there arose a class of sages and scribes who determined that if God's people would faithfully keep the Law, God would restore them to their holy land, rebuild the Temple, and reinstate the Glory of Israel. Therefore, these people set about defining rules that they thought would keep people from even coming close to breaking the Laws of Moses, forestalling any further acts of divine wrath. These traditions came to be known as a fence around the Law or as Jesus calls them today, the Traditions of the Elders, and the staunch adherents to these traditions were called Pharisees, or "separated ones." The Pharisees were one of three traditional sects within ancient Judaism, with the Sadducees and the Essenes being the other two.

After the Maccabean revolt in 167 B.C.E. against the Seleucids and later the establishment of the Hasmonean monarchy, which was not seen as legitimate by the Pharisees, the Pharisees became the voice of the people in opposition to the ruling priestly elites and their abuses.

In Jesus' day, a late emerging wrinkle in the practice of washing before a meal seems to have been placed almost on a par with the laws of Moses by some Pharisees. Well if not on par, elevated to the point that it became contentious. Breaches of such traditions in the minds of some Pharisees rendered a person not only ceremonially or ritually unclean - defiled - but often caused the violators to be labeled sinners and to be avoided. However, let me clarify that being unclean or impure was not synonymous with being immoral, only as having missed the mark, sinned as it were, in personal purity and piety. Being ceremonially un-clean required just an act of purification like washing one's hands or bathing, etc. Immorality required forgiveness and often acts of sacrifice. Thus, not keeping the traditions of the Elders was not damning so much as dishonoring the individual and the community.

In today's situation, the Pharisees' practice of ceremonially washing their hands before eating or for the super-pious after each course of food, and after the meal itself, was believed to have stemmed from the requirement for the priests serving in the temple to perform a ceremonial washing before eating sacrifices that had been offered in the temple as prescribed in Lev. 22:1-16. This led some of the Scribes and Pharisees to think that what was right and holy for the priest was right and holy for everyone else, always. In addition, some, not all, of the Pharisees turned this into a great spectacle, washing their hands, holding them high so that everyone could see. They let the water run down to their elbows before proceeding to eat.

I hasten to point out, that Jesus does not condemn the Oral Traditions of the Elders, only the Pharisees' misuses, burdensome applications, and the perverting of the original intent of the Traditions. That having been said, even a cursory look at world religions, ancient and modern, reveals that some form of washing or bathing; that is, cleaning one's self up, putting on special clothes, etc. play a crucial role in people's religious thinking.

This thinking also serves as a reminder of one's status in relationship to the radical otherness of God. Therefore, these special preparations are symbolic of making one's self physically, psychologically, and spiritually ready for a worshipful approach to God, especially when we understand that what is symbolic in some way participates in what is referred to.

Before we say such thinking is just the unsophisticated beliefs of ancient people, such ideas are still a part of some of our thinking today. For instance, growing up we always had to take a bath, wash our hair, clean our finger nails, shine our shoes, and put on our best clothes to go to church. I am sure some folks went to church to see and be seen, as it were, but that was not supposed to be the intent and purpose of cleaning up and dressing up. It was to acknowledge one's status before God, show respect for the church, and God's people gathered to worship.

Furthermore, when one went to church, we, men and women, dressed modestly because we did not want to offend the sensibilities of others or draw the wrong kinds of attention to ourselves. Cleaning up and putting on one's best was marking and making clear the boundaries between what

was sacred and the common place or vulgar. Many people still make such preparations before going to church.

But, in all fairness to the Pharisees, it is believed that the original purpose for washing the hands before and after a meal was simply an act of thanksgiving for the gift of food from God. Therefore, it initially had nothing to do with hygiene or ritual purity; it had to do with godliness and thankfulness. Nevertheless, it got out of hand - no pun intended - when the ceremony became such a rigid and ostentatious practice that it offended, segregated, and dishonored some of God's people.

Jesus frequently takes exception to the Pharisees and their Traditions of the Elders, especially those that were unduly burdensome to the common folk in their everyday life. Therefore, we see in our scripture readings today Jesus pointing out a conflict between the misuse of a religious tradition - the practice of washing one's hands before a meal - and the keeping of one of the Ten Commandments; that is commandment number five, to honor one's father and mother.

Given that the Pharisees were keen on building a fence around the Law to prevent people from even skirting the possibilities of breaking the Law, the laws governing vows came under their scrutiny and disputations. As is common in schools of Law and legal discourse, arguments often went to the ridiculous. So, hear Jesus, and concomitantly Matthew, commenting on one of those foolish legal points that were so prevalent among the Pharisees regarding the making and breaking of vows.

In Jesus' day, and in many parts of the world today, a person's social security in old age was and is their children. Some Pharisees, either for reasons of piety or out of anger at their parents, believed they could pledge gifts of various resources to God or the Temple; and thereby placed these resources out of reach for other uses, including caring for one's family.

Although, this doesn't seem to have been a widespread practice and the prevailing humanitarian opinion among many of the scribes and sages of the day, who had the authority to countermand such vows, was that a person could not make a vow that directly contradicted a commandment of God or violated legitimate humanitarian concerns. Yet, other religious sages, especially those we could imagine having vested interest in such pledges, stated that if you made a vow to God, you had to keep it and sited scripture to support such a claim. Jesus today blatantly condemns those, who would make such a vow or try to hold others to such pledges.

Jesus in effect wades in on one of those facetious, hair-splitting legal controversies of the day and makes a distinction between what is legal and what is moral. In his redress of the Pharisees, he is publicly amazed and outraged that the Pharisees would even consider such a thing, even in the rarified atmosphere of the hypothetical. Jesus' issues a scathing indictment of those who are supposed to be the guardians of the Law - you hypocrites; play-actors at righteousness - how can you serve your perverted understandings of the Oral Traditions by even considering the violation of one of God's Ten Commandments, even if just for argument sake.

Jesus makes the case that eating with unwashed hands may make one ceremonially unclean per human traditions, but it does not render one defiled, that is unclean, unholy, unacceptable before God. The things that rupture a person's relationship with God are the immoral, evil, duplicitous, and hateful things people hold in their hearts - the center of their values - whether they find expression in word or deed, or not. And, even thinking about a case wherein a person would not provide proper support for one's aged parents under the ruse of a gift to God is so despicable and dishonorable as to be unimaginable. The crowd, the court of public opinion, would have whole heartedly agreed with Jesus.

In moments of solemn reflection on these passages and others like them, I have come to believe that a major impediment to many people experiencing a deep and lasting spiritual life can

be found in their equating religious conventions, doctrines, and traditions as the sum of their relationship to God and others.

That is not to say, and I don't think Jesus would have said, that one's religious traditions, conventions, and doctrines for the most part are bad or even wrong in and of themselves. Our traditions, conventions, and doctrines give us a sense of ourselves as being anchored in history, a community, a family, etc. They often give us a sense of social propriety and order as well as provide helpful aids in complying with the teachings of scripture. However, when traditions and human doctrines take on the weight of divine commandments, especially to the point that they exclude people in matters of faith and fellowship, or judge others as unholy and sinners, we stand not only on a slippery slope of hypocrisy but Christian ineffectiveness and a vacuous spiritual life.

Let me give you some examples of what I am talking about drawn from my earliest Christian experiences. In the religious heritage I grew up in, the church, drawing on the long history of the abuses of alcohol and its effects on the family, with good intent strongly condemned the drinking of any form of alcohol as a beverage. There was no such thing as responsible drinking. Overtime, this became what we sometimes jokingly called the 11<sup>th</sup> commandment - "Thou shall not drink alcohol as a beverage."

Another tradition of our church was its stance on dancing. Men and women, boys and girls in such close physical contact while dancing or gyrating around the dance floor was tantamount to an ancient, heathenistic fertility dance and invited sexual disasters. One minister called dancing a heathenistic belly-rubbin'. Thus, the 12<sup>th</sup> Commandment, "Thou shall not dance."

I have seen people "churched" over the violations of these human doctrines and traditions; judged as unholy, sinners, reprobates, and their lives ruined. I could name other so-called fences designed to keep us from sin but these two will suffice to make my point.

Furthermore, I was taught that the only valid Christian baptism was by emersion, others were taught that sprinkling or pouring were valid baptisms. Others believed there were to be no musical instruments in the church; we had pianos galore. As I said, I was taught that the consumption of alcoholic beverages was as close to sin as one could get without actually committing a moral infraction. Other people drank wine for communion. I was taught that dancing was a device of the devil, while other churches held dances or sock-hops in their fellowship halls. One could smoke cigarettes or cigars, dip, or chew, but no drinking. One could abuse prescription drugs and walk around like a zombie, but no drinking. One could eat one's self into oblivion, but no drinking or dancing. (*Growing up, I never heard a sermon on gluttony. Wonder why? Well, most of the ministers and many of us in the congregation were obese!*) Furthermore, we never questioned these doctrines and applied them liberally to people and judged them accordingly.

Please let us remember that Jesus severely admonished those who placed human, religious tradition on a near par with the commandments of God. Furthermore, Jesus' holy criteria for acceptance before God as well as a person's true measure of holiness was to be found not in human doctrines and traditions but in the Greatest Commandments:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'<sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Love understood, as the honoring loyalty and caring for those of one's family, community, and tribe, regardless of social status or sect. It would not be until much later that this love of neighbor became universalized in Christian thinking to include not only one's fellow Christians of whatever ilk but all humanity.

In closing, let me highlight a point the disciples made in our scriptures this morning. It is a point that is very important for Matthew's church and for us. In verse 12 we hear, "Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"

Jesus in effect says to his disciples, and I paraphrase, "Frankly, guys, I don't give a damn what those religious leaders, be they Pharisees, Sadducees, Popes, Bishops, denominational leaders, religious teachers of whatever ilk or denomination think, especially when they refuse to internalize the Law of Love as the basis of their relationship to God and to others. They are blind fools, dishonorable people, leading blind fools along a path of eternal alienation from all that is holy and they are not of life."

So, I guess on second thought, Jesus' Jewish audience's and Matthew's Jewish audience's ethnicity had little to do with the truths inherent in our scriptures this morning. People of all races and ethnicities, across the ages have sought power in and over life and others through religion; however, let us as people of Christ be those who seek a relationship to God and others solely on God's terms.