

# Explore the Bible Series for October 21: Practice genuine purity

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## Practice genuine purity

- Matthew 15:1-20

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The way we read the Bible affects the way we treat other people. Needless to say, interpretation of Scripture is an extremely important matter.

The Pharisees were teachers of the law. They were popular among the Jewish laity and primarily were responsible for explaining Scripture and relating the law to the daily life of first-century Israel. When Jesus began his ministry, several Jews in Galilee and Judea were amazed by the power of his teaching and by his ability to heal invalids. Jesus' understanding of the requirements of the law, however, ran counter to that of the Pharisees.

As Jesus' followers increased in number, the Pharisees felt threatened by the burgeoning popularity of the Nazarene. As we have seen in previous lessons, they even resorted to looking for opportunities to kill him.

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Do you remember their confrontation with him about Sabbath observance in Matthew 12? After Jesus declared “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (v. 8) and healed a man on the Sabbath (vv. 9-13), they went out and plotted to destroy him (v.14).

At stake in several disputes between the two was the interpretation of Scripture. Although the Pharisees declared on many occasions that Jesus and his disciples violated the letter of the law, Jesus insisted mercy was better than sacrifice: “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out” (Matthew 12:11)? Jesus prioritized love and mercy over strict observance of the Law.

In Matthew 15:1-20, Jesus and the Pharisees are again in a dispute over the application of Scripture. “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?” The Pharisees raised this charge against the disciples. Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition” (Matthew 15:3)?

Jesus pointed out to his religious opponents that even though they openly demanded strict observance of the law, they themselves interpreted it loosely whenever it was to their advantage. His intention was not to demand stricter observance from them but to show their tradition interpreted passages from Deuteronomy in a way that was not explicitly stated in those texts. Essentially, they were adding to the law.

Jesus explained that according to Scripture, Israelites were instructed to “honor their father and mother” (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16) and

that anyone “who curses their father and mother is to be put to death” (Exodus 21:17).

Yet the Pharisees were not encouraging strict obedience in either of these cases; they extrapolated from the text, showing various ways in which these verses could be understood. Jesus called them hypocrites for demanding meticulous observance of the tradition of the elders while they themselves did not strictly adhere to the commandments of God. He quoted from the book of Isaiah: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13).

Jesus then drew attention to Jewish purity laws, particularly those found in Leviticus regarding clean and unclean foods. Jesus’ use of this example displays the heart of his perspective about Scripture. Jesus fulfilled Old Testament law. He completed it, and it was summed up in him. In Christ, purity, cleanliness, and holiness were given new emphasis and meaning. Outward ritual lost importance when compared to one’s moral and ethical behavior.

Even his disciples seemed perplexed by Jesus’ teaching, and Peter asked for clarification. Jesus answered: “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body. But the things that come from out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean’” (Matthew 15:17-18).

This rather graphic illustration of food entering the body, going through the digestive tract, and then excreted “out of the body” demonstrated well that all food, whether clean or unclean, went to the same place. How could anything that entered the mouth and exited the body make a person pure? Instead, Jesus reversed the process. In this way, a person was pure based on the condition of his or her heart. Jesus put it bluntly: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19). These rendered a person unclean.

Each of these sins—perhaps with the exception of “evil thoughts”—involved wronging or violating another human being. This passage resonates well with Jesus’ command to love one’s neighbor as oneself. From the perspective of the Pharisees, they loved God, and they loved the Scriptures.

Yet something was lacking. Jesus demanded more. From his perspective, in order to “love God,” one must love his or her neighbor. When Jesus summed up the Law, it precluded loving God without also loving one’s neighbor. Loving God and loving your neighbor go hand in hand. To separate the two as distinct from one another—as the Pharisees did—would be contrary to Jesus’ teaching. We show our love and devotion to God by honoring our parents, by bringing justice to the poor and oppressed, by not slandering a good name, and by loving others (even those who have wronged us). Indeed, the way we read the Bible does affect the way we treat other people.

### **Discussion questions**

- How does the way we read the Bible effect how we treat other people?
- What do you think it means to be pure according to the Pharisees? According to Jesus?
- How is it possible for us to honor God with our lips and, at the same time, be far from God?
- How do we love God and love our neighbor? Which is more difficult? Why?

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