

August 16, 2026
“Lipstick on a Pig”
Matthew 15:10-20

Intro:

“Wash your hands before you eat.”

This is probably something your parents told you, and for you parents, something you tell your kids. It is pretty good advice, since you never know what your hands may have come in to contact with that could be transferred to your food and therefore into your digestive system.

Here’s another, older, phrase for you: “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.”

This applies more broadly than just to the washing of hands, and was usually used by parents as a way to try and get their children to clean their rooms... and maybe other household cleaning chores. But most people wouldn’t hear the phrase cleanliness is next to Godliness and assume it was a call to washing their hands before a meal. Right?

Context:

At the start of Matthew 15, we discover some Pharisees and teachers of religious law coming out of Jerusalem to have a very serious and important discussion with Jesus. The weighty issue that has brought them out from Jerusalem is this.... They want to ask Jesus why his disciples don’t follow the age-old tradition of ceremonial hand-washing before meals. Very serious. Very important. It seems that these religious leaders do, in fact, think that cleanliness being next to Godliness hinges upon washing one’s hands before a meal.

Before we get too far down this road, I want to clarify that what the Pharisees are talking about is not hygienic washing with soap and water before eating. They are talking about ritualistic washing that was intended as a ward against possible contamination from eating (or even touching) food that was considered

ceremonially unclean – such as meat that had been sacrificed to idols prior to hitting the market stalls.

The idea was that if a person washed appropriately, that action would make the food clean and clear for consumption. If one did not wash in the proper way, that food would contaminate their soul and they would be considered unclean before God.

I'm not really sure how cleaning hands countered whatever was unclean about the food, rather than, say, applying some sort of ceremonial cleaning or preparation to the food, but that wasn't the point. They saw Jesus' disciples apparently flaunting their precious laws and thereby putting their souls at risk.

The Root Problem:

Here's another phrase for you: "It's like putting lipstick on a pig."

This might be a bit more obscure, but the general idea of this phrase is that you can do anything you want to make a pig pretty, but underneath all the make-up, it is still a pig. The lipstick can't cover up the fact of just what it is. This phrase was understood in the context of people thinking that pigs were dirty and disgusting animals.

Jesus' response to those Pharisees is basically to call them out for trying to put lipstick on a pig. He calls them out for pretending to be pious people, but in reality being the worst offenders when it came to not understanding and breaking God's laws. He even applies words from Isaiah to them: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God."

Harsh words, and certainly ones that would upset them – which the disciples point out to Jesus in verse 12.

Here is the point of the matter for Jesus: He calls all the people present (who have likely been trying to avoid looking like they were listening in to the earlier

conversation) to pay attention. Then he promptly turns their whole ceremonial clean and unclean system of understanding on its head. "It's not what goes into your mouth that defiles you; you are defiled by the words that come out of your mouth."

When pressed by his disciples, Jesus explains that what he means is that food just goes into the mouth and passes through the system until it eventually leaves and goes into the sewer. It is not what goes into the mouth that they need to be concerned with, but what is coming out of their mouths. Their words, and the intention behind those words, reflect the level of defilement in their hearts.

The Pharisees thought that if they performed all the proper ceremony and ritual, they would look like they were properly religious. But this was surface dressing to look good without actually having to address their defiled inner nature. It was that nature that made them jealous of Jesus' influence, to treat people as lesser, to speak lies, and who knows what other manner of evil words and actions.

They were putting lipstick on, to try and cover up that they were just pigs.

Conclusion:

Because of sin, human nature starts out in a defiled position. Everyone is in that same position. We try to hide it under good deeds, or looking or sounding like what we think a good Christian would look or sound like, but at the end of the day, we are still defiled on the inside. The rule of ceremonial washing tries to say that we have the control and power to clean up what defiles us. Even more than that, we have the power in ourselves to prevent evil from coming in. This is simply not true. It is only the power of God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and under the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, that can cleanse the defilement that is in our hearts.

Jesus sets a test for his listeners to apply to themselves: listen to the words that come out of their mouths. He could have had them focus in on actions, but He chose to focus on their words.

Words convey all sorts of meaning and intent. When we speak, what is the motive behind those words? Are we telling a story to one-up the person we are talking to and the story they just told? Are we trying to wound with words disguised as compliments? Of course, words are just one of the ways to discern what is truly in our hearts. Our actions and our behaviour towards others are good indicators of how healthy our hearts are. Lipstick on the pig is what happens when we smile and tell someone how wonderful they are, when underneath that smile we are really thinking about how much we dislike them.

Cleaning this up is work that only Jesus can do. We can help a bit, but ultimately we need to allow the Holy Spirit full access to every part of our heart's desires, our thoughts, our hopes and dreams. We can be careful about what we allow into our hearts and minds – what we read, what we watch on tv or listen to. We can be careful about the people we spend the bulk of our time with – what are their language and attitudes? If, for example, we are only around people who use God's name inappropriately, then despite our best efforts, we are more likely to do so ourselves. We can, as they say, take captive every word that comes from our mouths. What this means is that we actually listen to the words we speak, and the intention behind those words, to see if they honour or dishonour God. In all of this, we need to keep a short account of sin before God. We need to daily confess our failures to God and open ourselves to the Holy Spirit to change us.

Let's pray.