

## Transformation...for Better or Worse

We live in kind of a germ obsessed society, so a lot of us are probably all in on this business of washing your hands before you eat. I mean, get with it Jesus...why would you let your disciples do that? Gross!

Except of course that's not what this is about at all. People then had no idea about germs and disease, let alone that washing your hands could help.

What they did know, and what the Pharisees knew especially well, was the Jewish law. This handwashing wasn't about hygiene. It was about Jewish law.

Back in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, God, through Moses, laid out the laws concerning food and preparation of food. These laws governed what could be eaten and what couldn't be eaten. It's why Jewish people don't eat pork and certain other foods.

It also outlined rituals for the preparation of food and cookware. It dictated what foods could be cooked together. And it laid out a process of ritual handwashing before the meal.

All of these laws and rituals were designed to set God's people apart – to put boundaries around the community and give them an identity of their own. These laws made it clear to Israel and their neighbors to whom they belonged. Failure to follow the rituals would render you defiled. In other words you would be impure or unclean. It was a state that set you apart from God and the community.

So this story is about way more than hygiene. In essence, Jesus is changing the laws. Jesus is changing what it means to be God's people...to be a party of the community.

So if these rituals were given in the first place by God, what's the deal? Why is Jesus upending thousands of years of tradition?

The problem is that the ritual seemed to have become nothing more than that...a ritual...empty. The Pharisees were following the rituals, but they weren't actually living by the laws God designed for the well-being of the community.

The rituals were hollow. They were focused on the ritual and blind to the fact that the rest of their lives paid no honor to God or the people God called them to care for. Ritual demanded that they give their wealth to God...and in offering everything in the ritual sacrifice, they neglected to care for their mother and father.

So many times the prophets had charged Israel with the same thing. The prophets accused them of being all about the worship and sacrifice but not so much about caring for the poor and suffering.

Following all the rituals didn't seem to be making them truly God's people.

They worried about what they put in their mouths and how they did it. But that food just went through and its remains into the sewer. It's not what really mattered.

What Jesus really cared about was what came out in their words and actions. And that was a mess.

Jesus said, It's not what goes into us that causes the trouble...it's what comes out.

We no longer have the issue of ritual purity that Jewish people deal with. But there are other things. We fear all sorts of corrupting, or defiling, influences, especially for our kids. We especially look at pop culture – music, videos, video games and so on – and worry about their corrupting influence.

So this story begs the question...if defilement really is about all the evil that comes out of people – theft, murder, greed, abusive and exploitive sex, envy, lying, violence, racism, arrogance, how did those things get there?

When my kids were growing up, rap music was just exploding on the music scene. Gangsta rap in particular was a force to be reckoned with.

Although the 90's were the real heyday, it still had a significant following in the early 2000's when my kids were starting to listen to popular music.

Sam in particular was captivated by the likes of Tupac, NWA and the Notorious B.I.G.

Although I've always liked the beat and feel of rap music, I thought the lyrics of this gangsta rap were awful. Drugs, violence, gangs...I was sure it was a terrible corrupting influence.

But as I learned more, the way I saw it began to change. Now, don't get me wrong. There are deeply problematic issues in the world of gangsta rap. The glorification of violence and gangs, drugs, sexual violence, anti-police sentiment and so on is deeply troubling. The fact that a fair number of the early rappers were killed before they hit 30, often in gang-related shootings, is a testament to that.

But when you start learning more, you begin to hear the stories the rappers are trying to tell. Stories of inner city violence and despair. In Los Angeles, they rapped of police brutality – a problem the department itself finally acknowledged and began addressing.

It's not like the concern for corrupting influence...defiling influence...went away for me. It's that instead of hearing only that, I could hear the pain in the lives of young people who felt trapped in a world with no constructive way out...a world with no hope.

And in the last year, I saw the 2015 movie Straight Outta Compton. It tells the story of a famous rap group in 1990's Los Angeles. It's raw, in parts it's obscene and degrading and ultimately it's tragic. But it tells a story I can't begin to fathom. And that's what makes it all important...valuable even.

In the end, hard core rap didn't really do all the terrible things to my kids I thought it would and they moved on to other music.

But it's a question our culture continues to wrestle with. Do violent video games cause violence? Do music videos that seem too sexual contribute to sexual violence and human trafficking? Does rap music contribute to drug abuse and gang violence? Or for that matter does country music contribute to alcoholism?

Or do all those things instead tell us a story...a story about humans and their struggles?

Does what goes in defile? Or is it what comes out? Is it as simple as the purity laws Jesus dealt with? That would mean it's what comes out, not what goes in. Is it that simple?

And how did all that bad stuff that comes out get there in the first place?

Honestly, I think the answer is as old as the Adam and Eve story. Within us from the very beginning is that little voice inside that says God really doesn't know what's best for us...we want to be our own gods.

We want to judge right from wrong in our own eyes.

That little voice is the voice of the tempter...the Satan. However you visualize the force of evil, that is the force that I believe causes all the bad stuff that comes out of us.

That voice whispers to us that nobody, not even God, gets a say in how we live. That is the voice responsible for the violence, the hatred, the racism, the greed, the envy, the exploitation of other peoples' bodies for sexual gratification.

So if blocking those defiling or corrupting influences isn't the answer, what is?

Perhaps this will sound trite, but really the whole message of the gospel is that it's love. It's the love of God which has been God's answer to evil from the very beginning.

In Christ, all those Jewish laws...and every other law...were fulfilled. As Christ, through the Holy Spirit, sets up housekeeping in our hearts, love becomes our guide. Love becomes our eyes and ears...love sees the pain and suffering of others. Love hears the cries of inner city rappers as they tell a story we in our safe, more comfortable world don't always want to hear.

When love fills what's on the inside, that's what comes out. And when we can love someone whose life cries in pain, anger and even violence, just maybe we stop some of that bad that comes out.

Does love always work to stop evil? So far we'd have to say no. But history is full of countless times when it has...when someone shares Christ's love with another and they are transformed.

And in the end, I believe that love is the only thing that really can drive out evil.