

Introduction:

Has this ever happened to you? I opened the dishwasher to grab a coffee cup. The dishwasher had been run. The upside down coffee cup was sparkling. There was even that tell-tale bit of water resting on the bottom of the cup that never quite dries. I grabbed the cup, set it in the Keurig, and hit the button. Then I noticed it. The inside of the cup was filthy. Someone had made hot chocolate with little chunks of chocolate. The bits had melted and then stuck to the bottom of the cup. The inside wall was caked with the dried leavings of the rest of the hot chocolate. Whoever had used it had left it out on the counter instead of rinsing it when they were done. Whoever had loaded the dishwasher hadn't rinsed it either. Instead of getting cleaned by the water and soap, the chocolate had caked onto the cup's inside. What do you do when something like that happens? You quickly put it aside, grab a clean cup, and shove that under the Keurig spout. A cup is not clean if it isn't clean on the inside. It is silly to think otherwise. Twice, Jesus used this very principle as an illustration when dealing with the Pharisees (**Matthew 23:15-28; Luke 11:39-41**). His point was that a person is not clean unless clean on the inside. Let's examine the texts and some principles we can glean from them. In our next lesson, we'll talk about how to practically do what these texts are advising.

Discussion:

I. On Pharisees and Unclean Pots

- A. The Pharisees were ritualistic washers (**Mark 7:3-4**). They were afraid of being unclean. That comes from **Leviticus 11-15**. Note, for example, **Leviticus 11:29-38**. The Pharisees took this very seriously. You wouldn't want to be defiled by drinking from an unclean vessel or eating off an unclean plate. They wanted everyone to know they took defilement and cleanliness seriously. There is no way the Pharisees would drink from a cup or eat off a dish whose inside had not been cleaned. Somebody just trying to look good might do that, but not someone really wanting to be righteous. They would go through the whole process of washing inside and out because they really wanted to look righteous.
- B. The crazy thing is what the Pharisees would never in a million years do with their dishes, they did with their own selves. They worked on the outsides. They worked on what others saw, but left the insides defiled. Like whitewashed tombs, they were beautiful outside, but corrupt, defiled, and unclean inside. They appeared righteous to the casual observer, but to God, who knows the heart (**Luke 16:15**), they appeared despicable. He saw their greed, self-indulgence, wickedness, hypocrisy, and lawlessness. The contrasts in the Sermon on the Mount demonstrate the problem. In **Matthew 5:21-26**, they would not murder someone, but they would hate him. In **Matthew 5:27-28**, they may not commit adultery, but they would lust and fantasize about it. The Pharisees could hide that from many of the people who saw them, but they could not hide it from God.
- C. Of course, this led to one big problem. Try as they might to clean up their outsides, they couldn't do it. Because they allowed greed to infiltrate their heart, they were led to sin. As **Luke 20:46-47** says, they wore long robes, exchanged greetings, took the best seats, and offered long prayers, but on the sly they robbed widows. Eventually their hearts were revealed in their actions. Jesus really demonstrated this in **Mark 7:20-22**. They didn't clean the inside of themselves; that made every part of them unclean even though they went through extensive rituals to cleanse both the insides and outsides of all their cups and dishes.

II. On Christians and Clean Cups

- A. Consider some principles for our own clean living that come from Jesus's rebuke of the Pharisees.
- B. *White-knuckling doesn't work*: The Pharisees thought if they cleaned the outside, they would be clean. It didn't work like that (**Matthew 23:25**). Too many Christians are only making commitments about the behaviors. That is only cleaning the outside of the cup. They promise they will not look at pornography again, yell at their family again, lie or gossip again. It will be tough, but they are going to white-knuckle it. That is, they are going to try so hard it is like holding on to rail so tightly that their knuckles turn white. Spirituality is not an outside-in prospect. No doubt, you need to commit to avoiding the external sins. Obviously, if you keep looking at pornography, your heart will always be full of lust. If you keep yelling at your family, your heart will always be full of rage. If you keep lying and gossiping, your heart will always be full of deceit. So, make the commitment to stop the behavior, but understand that won't make you clean. White-knuckling doesn't work.

- C. *Lasting change comes from within*: While it is true that you will always have rage in your heart if you keep yelling at your family, if you try to stop yelling at your family without working on the rage in your heart, it will never last. You can white-knuckle for a while, but when the going gets rough what is in your heart is what will come out (cf. **Matthew 12:34**). Spirituality is an inside-out proposition. Thus Jesus told the Pharisees to clean the inside so that the outside can be clean (**Matthew 23:26**). So, make your commitment to clean up your behavior, but make a stronger commitment to clean up your heart, mind, and soul. Work on what you think, what you believe, what you tell yourself, what attitude you have.
- D. *Character matters more than reputation*: Reputation is what people see on the outside. Character is what is actually there on the inside. Don't be a whitewashed tomb (**Matthew 23:27-28**). You can live in a way that causes folks to think you are righteous. You can "go to church." You can defend a lot of rules. You can sound a trumpet to portray your spirituality (or perhaps I should say you can Tweet or Facebook about it). You can get everyone in the brotherhood thinking you are the most spiritual person they know. But who you are when you are alone is what matters most. A good reputation can come from a good character, but a good character doesn't come from a good reputation. How many preachers and pastors have had great reputations for defending the faith, but then we found out they were committing adultery. Having a good reputation didn't protect them from Satan's wiles. Work on character. Work on who you are on the inside where it is just you and God and let the reputation follow from that.
- E. *God deserves more than cleaned up behavior*: I struggled with **Luke 11:40** for a while. Why did Jesus bring up that God made both the outside and the inside? The point is that the way we live reflects on our Creator. The way we live is supposed to honor and glorify God. But God didn't just create our bodies; He created our hearts, minds, and souls. Therefore, He deserves more than honor with the externals. He deserves to be honored from the heart. He doesn't just have the authority to mandate our behavior; He has the authority to direct our hearts and minds as well. The same God who created the outsides of the Pharisees and commanded them to avoid adultery created their hearts and doesn't want them lusting. The great Creator who has given us life, breath, and all things deserves more than lip-service. He deserves sacrificed hearts.
- F. *External rules and regulations are not the heart of real religion*: No doubt there are rules and regulations in God's religion. But God isn't looking for people who can force their bodies to keep a set of rules and check off regulations; He is looking for people who long to be in relationship with Him. God doesn't want people who can say the right things. He isn't even looking for people who will simply do the right things. He wants folks to have the right heart (**Matthew 15:8**). He is looking for people with hearts that overflow with His glory and love. He is looking for people who will devote their hearts to Him. Thus in **Luke 11:41**, God doesn't want the guys who trumpet their alms-giving to the poor (cf. **Matthew 6:2**) or who diligently give the tithe (cf. **Matthew 23:23**);<sup>1</sup> He wants people who give their hearts, minds, and souls completely to Him.
- G. *Defiled people defile people*: When Jesus described the Pharisees as tombs, He made an additional subtle point. These people who went through all their ritual washings to make sure nothing defiled them were actually dead men. According to **Numbers 19:11-18**, if you touch a dead person or even enter a tent where someone died, you have become unclean. But notice specifically in **vs. 18** that anyone who touches the grave is also unclean. What did He say these Pharisees were? Whitewashed tombs. They were graves. They were desperate to keep from being defiled by everyone else, but they were the ones defiling others. Those who walked with them, followed them, imitated them were not being cleansed. They were being defiled. In fact, in **Matthew 23:15**, Jesus said these Pharisees would travel land and sea to produce one proselyte. That is, they would go to great lengths to get a Gentile to convert to Judaism and get circumcised. But when he did, he was a defiled child of hell. The same will be true for us. If we are simply converting people to attempts at cleaning the outside, we will not be cleansing them. We will only be defiling them even more.

#### Conclusion:

Plenty of us know **I Peter 3:21**. I hope this lesson will put that verse in a new light for us. There is a reason Peter explains that baptism isn't about cleansing the flesh. If all you want is to clean up the outside, baptism isn't for you. Baptism isn't about removing dirt. It also isn't for people who want to continue in their worldly mindsets while adding in some religious rituals. Baptism is for people who want their consciences cleaned. It is for those who want to devote their entire being to God, inside and out. Are you ready for that?

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<sup>1</sup> Be aware that tithing was a stipulation of the Old Covenant, not of the New. I'm using it as an illustration in this point simply because Jesus used it as He talked to Pharisees who were still under the Old Covenant.