

## Coming Clean

### **Psalm 24**

The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; 2 for He founded it on the seas and established it on the waters.

3 Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? 4 The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. (NLT who do not worship idols or tell lies)

5 They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God their Savior. 6 Such is the generation of those who seek Him, who seek Your face, God of Jacob. (NLT Open up, ancient gates! Open up, ancient doors)

7 Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. 8 Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. 9 Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

10 Who is He, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty—He is the King of glory.

How many of you have heard the expression to "come clean"? (hands raised) For those of you who didn't raise your hand, to "come clean" is another way of saying to "fess up," or tell all, like as in the truth. Coming clean is a way of taking ownership or responsibility for one's misdeeds.

One hopes that there are not too many times when it is necessary to "come clean." Why live in such a way in which you're always having to fess up? It doesn't sound like fun, spending a lot of time having to confess your crimes.

But when many of us were kids, "coming clean" was a common occurrence. A version of it happened just before arriving at the supper table: "Did you wash your hands?" mom asked. As kids, many of us heard that question all the time. It detoured us to the sink, on our way to dinner. We were, in a real sense, "coming clean." It's an even more important question today, living, as we do, in this overcrowded, disease-ridden Covid and Monkeypox filled world. Public health experts are forever teaching that one of the best disease-prevention techniques is also the simplest: the very one mom insisted on. Good old soap and water does the trick, as long as we devote proper time and attention to the task.

One old guideline suggests we ought to take as much time washing our hands as it takes to recite the 23rd psalm. The 30 seconds or so it takes to say that psalm at an ordinary conversational pace, is about the time many health experts recommend for a pre-meal hand-washing. (A bonus for Jesus followers: The psalm technique allows us to use this routine chore as a devotional moment and helps us to memorize Scripture.)

One day, a housework-challenged husband decided to wash his sweatshirt. Seconds after he stepped into the laundry room, he shouted to his wife, "Honey, what setting do I use on the washing machine?"

"It depends," she shouted back. "What does it say on your shirt?"

He yelled back, "Michigan State!" Somehow, I don't think that was the answer she was looking for.

A frequent sight these days at the entrances to hospitals, schools and other public buildings, is the antibacterial hand-wash dispenser. It's still not as effective as a good scrubbing with soap and water, but it's better than nothing (say the experts). Quite apart from keeping ourselves healthy, hand-washing keeps others healthy as well. As many well-intentioned, but ill-informed parents who skipped their kids' vaccinations learned during the recent measles outbreak, our personal disease-prevention decisions aren't as personal as we'd like to think. They have implications for our neighbors. We live in an interconnected world where no one of us is an island -- certainly, bacteria and viruses don't behave as though we are. Our hands are a principal means of sharing our "bugs" with others, even though we don't intend to do so.

Just as, in highly-liturgical traditions, like the Catholics, dipping one's fingers into the holy-water font has long been an expected routine upon entering the sanctuary as a reminder of one's baptism -- a brief stop at the antibacterial hand-wash dispenser in the narthex is becoming part of many worshipers' Sunday-morning routine. (It's actually not a bad idea to hit the hand-wash station *after* touching the holy water; unless that water is changed very frequently, it's like a bus stop for germs.)

I have to confess that this is coming from experience with people who are much more concerned with germs than I am. Yes I wash my hands before I come to church because I expect to shake hands with people but I am more a rub dirt on it and you will be just fine, kind of guy than one who worries about germs. My feelings on the subject are summed up in this poem:

If I live in a house of spotless beauty with everything in its place,  
but have not love, I am a housekeeper -- not a homemaker.

If I have time for waxing, polishing, and decorative achievements,  
but have not love, my children learn cleanliness -- not godliness.

Love leaves the dust in search of a child's laughter.

Love smiles at the tiny fingerprints on a newly cleaned window.

Love wipes away the tears before it wipes up the spilled milk. --Anonymous.

[NOTE 1] But the reality is, hand-washing before worship is actually an ancient practice. God was asking the same question, long before mom was: "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in God's holy place?" asks the author of Psalm 24. Only "those who have clean hands and pure hearts."

The Lord's hill, of course, is Mount Zion, the location of the temple in Jerusalem. It is holy because the Lord chose it to be so -- as the Lord is entitled to do, being the sole proprietor of heaven and earth as we read in Verse 1.

This proprietor insists on cleanliness for all who enter the temple courts -- but not just ordinary, physical cleanliness. The Hebrew word, *naqi* (here translated "clean"), literally means "innocent" or "unmarried" -- even "virginal." It's relatively uncommon in the Old Testament; other words are more frequently used to denote ordinary, physical cleanliness -- particularly the cleanliness rituals of the law of Moses. The psalmist, of course, was well aware that ritual washing was expected of temple worshipers, but was more interested in moral cleanliness as in ("a pure heart"). [NOTE 2]

Many Christian worship traditions include a confession of sin in the early part of the service. *It is, in a sense, a spiritual hand-washing.* When approached soberly and seriously, such a prayer is an act of spiritual purification -- the last vestige, for many of us, of the ancient purification rituals the psalmist knew so well.

The apostle Paul picks up a similar theme as he advises the Corinthians to avoid approaching the Lord's Table "unworthily" (1 Corinthians 11:29). This is the verse that spawned the use of communion tokens for Reformed worshipers in Colonial America. Worshipers were not admitted to the Lord's Table until they had first obtained a bronze or lead token -- like a small coin -- that served as their admission ticket to the sacrament. Communion tokens were handed out at the close of a lengthy penitential service of preparation, typically held on the Friday evening before Communion Sunday. This is where we get the tradition to put in the bulletin the exhortation to examine one's life before partaking of the Lord's Supper.

What does it mean to seek purity of heart? Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard said (in the title of a famous essay) it is "to will one thing." How difficult that is for people like us, buffeted to and fro by the demands of a wireless, multi-tasking world! [NOTE 3]

Yet, is there any alternative? Christian devotional practices -- like the contemplative practices of nearly all of the world's great religions -- are, for the most part, incompatible with the multi-tasking mindset prevalent in our society. In our prayers, in our contemplation, the goal is to will one thing: to achieve communion, however fleeting, with the divine ...with God. The chime of an incoming e-mail, the tyranny of a to-do list blaring its urgency, the obsessive desire to check back on Facebook to see how many "likes" we've garnered, are all enemies of spiritual centeredness. I propose that pure-hearted worship strives to will one thing, and that thing is praise of the Almighty. That is why, in the opening prayer on most Sundays, I pray that God would help us to focus, to put aside all hindrances, busyness, or anything else that would take away from our focus on giving God all the glory, honor, and praise that we can. [NOTE 4]

The next lines of the psalm shift the focus to another aspect of moral purity. Those who are able to stand with confidence and integrity in Yahweh's holy place, without being blasted to the ground by the divine glory, are those "who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully" (v. 4). Literally, the Hebrew means "who do not lift up their souls to emptiness (*shav*)." It's a word used elsewhere to

refer to the worship of idols, with the implication that idolatry offers only illusory and deceptive rewards. In simple terms, the worship of idols results in nothing but emptiness, or just plain nothing.

This concept calls to mind Isaiah's brilliant satire of the idol-maker in chapter 44 who cuts a block of wood in two, tossing half of it into the fire to warm himself, then carving the other half into a god before whom he bows down. "They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand." Such a deluded worshiper "feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?'" (Isaiah 44:16-20).

**[NOTE 5]** Surely there are abundant examples of idolatrous worship, of people in our culture "lifting up their souls to emptiness." So many of the golden prizes adored by those who frantically seek to achieve their own salvation -- money and fame being notable examples -- are, in fact, emptiness. The name of the television show *American Idol* is more truthful than its creators know.

Right worship is not like that. Right worship is truthful to its core, and single-minded in its devotion to the one true God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yahweh, the Creator, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Those who approach the holy places with clean hands and pure hearts, those who worship with integrity, are promised a remarkable benefit. They will receive Yahweh's blessing (*berakah*) and vindication (*sedeqah*). What must they do to receive such rewards? They need only "seek the face of the God of Jacob."

**[NOTE 6]** Now that sounds easy. But in reality, it's easier said than done. Seeking God's face is a singularly bold enterprise, according to the Old Testament. Not even Moses is permitted to view the glorious countenance of the Almighty. In Exodus 33:18-23, this venerable prophet and leader of God's people, this man who is Yahweh's own messenger, is allowed -- from the protective shelter of a cleft in the rock -- only the most fleeting glimpse of divine glory, as God "passes by." This is because, as the Lord graciously warns him, "no one shall see me and live."

But that doesn't stop these earnest worshipers from trying. Still, they yearn to look upon God's face. They seek the very blessing that not even Moses was permitted to receive. Granted, the psalmist never promises them they will succeed in their quest, although he does seem convinced that they will never cease their efforts to do so. I guess, in my own mind I think of it more as seeking God's presence, like an audience with the King. **[NOTE 7]**

Jesus makes an even bolder promise in the beatitudes: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). Cleanliness and purity obviously have a great deal to do with it. *Of all the blessed believers Jesus mentions in Matthew 5, only the pure in heart are granted a vision of the Almighty.* And who are these pure in heart of whom Jesus speaks? He doesn't say. It doesn't seem, though, to have the least bit to do with antibacterial gel -- nor, indeed, with anything else we can do to justify ourselves

by our own efforts. It has everything to do with who Jesus is and what he does for us.

- Our hands are not clean, but Jesus makes them clean.
- Our hearts are not pure, but Jesus washes them.
- Our attention wanders, but with infinite gentleness Jesus calls us back.

Let's come clean. It is Jesus whom we seek. And, by sheer grace, we are bold to claim that we will one day see him face to face -- with clean hands and a pure heart. Not because we followed Pastor Rick's sermon, not because of our efforts or anything we said or did. Only by grace through faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit, only **in Christ** are we made whiter than snow, given clean hands and a pure heart. If we allow Jesus to do that, if we receive the gift He offers, we can know that one day we will see Him, face to face. This King of glory, mighty in battle against germs, against sin, against evil, ...He will come in to our hearts and clean house, and we will see Him face to face. Let's pray ... AMEN

### Sermon Notes for "Coming Clean" based on Psalm 24

Given at Doster Community Church on August 28, 2022

- I. Who can ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in God's Holy Place?" Only "those who have clean hands and pure hearts.
- II. The psalmist is not worried about ritual washing. He is more concerned with moral cleanliness, meaning a pure heart and integrity (no deceit).
- III. In our prayers and contemplation, the goal is to achieve communion with God. But we must fight against distractions continually.
- IV. Another aspect of moral purity is to be one who does not lift up his soul to what is false or swear deceitfully (Verse 4).
- V. There are other idols than pieces of wood or metal. Right worship is truthful to its core and single-minded in its devotion to God. Those who approach God with clean hands and pure hearts will receive Yahweh's blessing.
- VI. What we must do is seek God's face. But that is easier said than done. Only the pure in heart (as spoken by Jesus as recorded in Matthew 5:8) are granted a vision of the Almighty.
- VII. Our hands are not clean, but He makes them clean. Our hearts are not pure, but He washes them and makes them clean. Our attention wanders, but with infinite gentleness and humbleness of heart Jesus calls us back. What are you going to do about it?