

# What defiles a man



Matthew 15:1-11; Mark  
7:1-23

Year B Proper 17

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## Parts by scene

■ = large part   ▲ = medium sized part   ● = small part

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▲	Scribe - an associate of the Pharisee who's more open minded	▲
▲	Pharisee - a Temple official under orders to generate some incriminating evidence against Jesus	▲
▲	Man - an irreverent man in the crowd	▲
▲	Woman - an earnest inquirer in the crowd	▲
●	Jesus	●

## Scene 1

Jesus , Man , Pharisee , Scribe , Woman

*{The Pharisee and the scribe stand in a crowd listening to Jesus preach.}*

**Scribe**     *[in a slightly elevated voice so he can be heard over the preaching and the sounds of the crowd]* I still don't understand why we're here.

**Pharisee**   *[impatiently]* I told you! To get the dirt on this guy.

**Scribe**       We must have missed it. Do we at least have the witness?

**Man**         *[with a humorous lilt in his voice]* Hey! Indoor voices!

**Scribe**       Sorry!

**Pharisee**     *[in the same loud voice]* What are you talking about?

**Scribe**       *[in a lower voice]* Whoever heard him say whatever it was that he said.

**Pharisee**     *[scornfully]* What are you talking about?

**Scribe** *[still in a lower voice]* I assume somebody heard him say something improper, and we're here to investigate.

**Pharisee** *[still loud]* We are here to *make* him say something improper!

**Woman** *[meekly]* Excuse me, but could you be a little quieter?

**Scribe** Sorry! *[to the Pharisee]* Did you just say we're going to try *provoking* him into an incriminating statement?

**Pharisee** Believe me, he's said plenty in the past. But not enough that we can arrest him - yet. We're here to collect more evidence.

**Scribe** This sort of thing might not stand up in court.

**Pharisee** *[grimly]* Court will not be a problem. *[brightening]* He's done! Okay, get ready.

**Jesus** *[to the crowd]* We're going to take a break to eat, but I will speak again in a half hour.

**Man** *[to the Pharisee and scribe, a little sarcastically]* Pardon me, I *couldn't help* but overhear your conversation.

**Pharisee** *[warningly]* If you did, then you know we're here on Temple business.

**Man** *[in sarcastic mock innocence]* Oh, is the Temple in the business of entrapment these days?

**Scribe** *[earnestly]* Sir? I can assure you that we're here only to observe, and that we have no reason to act improperly at any point, since that would only invalidate any evidence we collected.

**Woman** *[honestly inquiring]* Why are you collecting evidence against the rabbi in the first place? He seems like a wonderful teacher to me.

**Pharisee** *[sternly]* You should leave such judgments to those who are qualified to make them. For your protection, I might add. And furthermore - *[suddenly excited]* Look! Look! We've got him now!

**Scribe** What happened?

**Pharisee** Just follow me!

**Woman** What happened? What are they going to do?

**Man** I have no idea, but I wouldn't miss it for the world! Come on!

*{They all go to where Jesus is eating with the disciples.}*

**Pharisee** Hey you! You!

**Jesus** Yes?

**Pharisee** Your followers. They didn't wash their hands! You're all eating without having first washed your hands!

**Man** So?

**Pharisee** He clearly has no respect for the Law!

**Woman** How are they breaking the law?

**Scribe** Do you mean the ceremonial hand washing? Is that what you're talking about?

**Pharisee** Of course!

**Scribe** It's not technically law. It's more...

**Pharisee** Tradition! I know that. What I don't know is why these people are disrespecting it. *[to Jesus]* Well? What do you have to say for yourselves?

**Scribe** *[in a low whisper to the Pharisee]* Sir? This is hardly an actionable offense.

**Pharisee** *[hissing scornfully]* I know! But once we've got him engaged, who knows what else he might say?

**Woman** Is this really important? I have to say, I sometimes skip it myself.

**Man** *[in a loud voice so the crowd can hear]* These are hardy travelers. Working men, too, by the look of them. Are we going to force them to follow every little high class ritual?

*{The crowd murmurs in approval.}*

**Pharisee** *[to Jesus]* Well? Why are your disciples so disrespectful of our traditions?

**Jesus** *[simply]* Why are your traditions so disrespectful of God's law?

*{The crowd goes nuts. The woman gasps.}*

**Man** *[half to himself]* Whoa! This guy's hard core!

**Pharisee** *[almost inarticulate with anger]* How dare you! How dare you...

**Scribe** *[stepping in in a calm voice]* Can you be more specific? How do our traditions disrespect God's law?

**Jesus** The law says, "Honor your father and your mother." Yet, you allow people to neglect their filial duty by dedicating the money they should be using to support their parents to the Temple instead! So when their parents come to them in their need, they tell them, Sorry, the money is God's.

**Pharisee** What? That's ridiculous! There's no reason a man can't do both. Everyone *should* do both!

**Woman** But not everybody does. I heard about someone once who "dedicated" their savings to the Temple just so they wouldn't have to give any of it to their parents.

**Man** What, and they didn't actually give the money to the Temple?

**Woman** Not exactly. They said it would all go to the Temple when they died, but in the meantime, they could use it freely for their own needs!

**Man** Clever!

**Scribe** *[urgently but politely]* No, no! That's wrong. I can tell you categorically that neither the law of Moses nor any ceremonial law allows that. Both the letter and the spirit of the law are quite clear that anything dedicated to God may no longer be put to personal use. Your friend is simply an oath breaker!

**Man** But here's my question: how many "oath breakers" are there out there? I've heard a few stories myself. If everyone's doing it, and you're allowing it, then the rabbi here is right.

**Pharisee** *[sternly]* Everyone is *not* doing it! Many *wish* to, but we deny them.

**Woman** What? Many wish to? That's despicable!

**Scribe** *[sadly]* It's not as terrible as it might sound. Many dedicate large sums or properties to God, but then fall on hard times and ask to

be relieved of their oath. And it's true that many are denied. However, there is a great deal of debate over this. I myself stand on the other side of the question from my colleague here. I believe we should be more lenient in these cases.

**Pharisee**     *[in a hissing whisper to the scribe]* Will you stop airing our dirty laundry!

**Jesus**        *[in a loud voice]* The oath was made for man, and not man for the oath! Isaiah was right about you hypocrites: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."

*{The crowd cheers.}*

**Scribe**        No, no! It's not that simple! Oaths are indeed made for man, but they will cease to serve us if we begin treating them like they're nothing. I say this even though I'm on the lenient side of the debate. And every time a man comes to me needing to be released from his oath, the first thing I tell him is to consider persevering. To dedicate anything of yours to God is to put God first, to say that He gets the first cut of the profits, the choice of the best calf. If we put God first, He will surely provide for all our other needs. We just have to have faith.

*{The crowd cheers again.}*

**Man**           *[into the silence following the cheer]* And what about those who dedicated their savings to God, but then God did not in fact provide for them? You said yourself there are a lot of people in this fix. What happened to them? Did they just not have enough faith?

*{A silence while everybody ponders this.}*

**Woman**      *[timidly venturing]* I'd still like to hear about the washing of hands. *[warming up a bit]* Because, like I said, I skip it myself sometimes. But when I do do it, it feels good. I mean, of course it's always good to wash your hands before eating. *[raising her voice to the crowd]* All of you should be doing it, and teaching your children to do it, for your own health! My sister is a midwife, and she says that dirty hands are the worse thing for good health that she can think of, short of drunkenness. *[lowering her voice back to the immediate group]* But I'm talking about spiritually now. It's a good ritual, kind of a little baptism. It often feels like a part of the grace we say before eating. So I wonder, too, why these spiritual teachers didn't do it.

- Jesus** *[explanatorily]* A man cannot be defiled by anything that goes into his mouth. For everything he eats simply goes into his belly, and then out again into the toilet.
- Pharisee** *[sputtering in rage]* What? Did he really say...? This is outrageous!
- Man** *[in delight]* "Out again into the toilet"! That's awesome! I never thought I'd hear a religious teacher *literally* talk shit! *[to Jesus]* You, sir, are my hero!
- Pharisee** What he is is a foul mouthed thug! *[to the crowd]* Did you hear what he said? Do you see how little he respects the rules by which we live? There are women and children here!
- Woman** I wasn't offended. I'll admit, I was caught off guard at first, but my sister talks just as frankly - and as truly - about our bodies and how they work.
- Scribe** *[to Jesus, beginning to get a little annoyed]* I think you're just playing to the crowd now. Can't we talk reasonably about this?
- Jesus** *[continuing his earlier statement]* ...while from *out* of the mouth come lies, threats, deceit, and hypocrisy!
- Pharisee** *[in a rage]* That's enough! This spectacle is over! Everyone: leave now! On orders from the Temple. *[to the scribe]* Come on! We have a report to file.
- Scribe** *[with concern]* What are you going to report? His position was simplistic, but not dangerous, I think. And he certainly didn't say anything he could be arrested for.
- Pharisee** *[suddenly not angry at all, though with some impatient condescension]* It's not about sufficient cause for arrest. It's about appearances. The goal is to make him look bad to the people. It is they - their constantly swaying opinion - that determines whether a judge will uphold an arrest. Not the law. And I'd say we did pretty well on that account.
- Scribe** *[profoundly disturbed]* I...I can only say I disagree with that characterization of our legal system. Or if it's true, then the system needs to be fixed. But in any case, how did we even win in the court of public opinion? The crowd loved him.
- Pharisee** *This* crowd did, on *this* day. But who knows how they'll feel tomorrow? Meanwhile, we have two more items for his dossier:

his show of contempt for our traditions, and his use of crude language in a public place, with children in the crowd!

*{Meanwhile, the man and woman talk.}*

**Man** Wow.

**Woman** *[in a bit of a daze]* That was...I don't know what to think about it.

**Man** I liked what *you* said, anyway. We spend so much time arguing over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, when we should really just be washing our hands more.

**Woman** *[with a laugh]* Well, my sister would certainly say the hand washing does more good. *[in a more serious tone, after a pause]* What did you think of him?

**Man** The rabbi? I'm with you: I don't know what to think. But anyone who can best a Pharisee and a scribe in verbal combat gets my respect.

**Woman** Are you going to stay for the second sermon?

**Man** No, I've got to run. Are you?

**Woman** Yes. I only stopped out of curiosity this morning, and now it's two hours later! I've got a ton of things to do today, but somehow, I can't tear myself away. There's something special about that man...

**Man** Well, enjoy the show. Ah! I see they're done eating. If you'll excuse me, I want to talk to him before I leave.

*{He goes over to Jesus.}*

**Man** Excuse me, but I couldn't help but notice that you successfully dodged the original question. So: why *didn't* you and your followers wash your hands before eating?

**Jesus** *[simply]* We were very hungry, and there wasn't a wash basin in sight.

**Man** Ha! I love it! I wish my rabbi was as cool as you are.

**Jesus** Then follow me.

**Man**

What? *[awkwardly after a long surprised pause]* Uh, sorry. I can't. *[brightening]*  
You see, I'm my parents' sole support, and I can't abandon them to  
go chasing after God, can I?

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*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at  
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