

PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL PURITY AS BASIS FOR HEALING AND HOLINESS IN MARK 7:1-7

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the significance of purity for healing and health. Despite all the exploits that the world has witnessed in the field of science and technology, sicknesses and diseases still pose a serious threat to the existence of man on earth. Many new contagious, incurable, terminal diseases are being discovered almost on daily basis and the medical sciences seem not to have solution to most of these health challenges. It has been discovered however that the choice of personal lifestyle is crucial to health and illness. The link between lifestyle and health is a major area of interest in public health today. Man's lack of clean habits has been identified as the major cause of contagious diseases. In most cases, poor personal hygiene and public sanitation aid the spread of infectious diseases. In this regard, physical and spiritual purity as basis for healing and holiness is examined through an exegetical analysis of Mark 7 to actualize the theological meaning of the text in today's context and, engender commitment to personal and societal transformation. The paper adopts both the historical critical method and historical materialist sociological method. It is believed that the control of most of the contagious diseases depends largely on high standard of personal and environmental hygiene and holy living.

Introduction

Purity is defined as the state of not being mixed with anything else. Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defined it as when something is clean or free from harmful substances. It could mean moral goodness or the state of not having sex. To purify is to remove bad substances from something to make it pure/clean; to make something fit to be used for religious purposes. Purity is best understood as the condition that God demands of his people for contact with him. Yahweh is holy, what is unclean is an abomination to him and will not be tolerated. Only what is pure is accessible to the Holy. Thus Yahweh outlined purification procedures in the Old Testament, through sacrifices, washings and offerings to manage and clean up socio-moral contaminants¹. The Decalogue is instructional and has a status like canon law to protect such zones of holiness and in a more general way, to prevent the disordering power of impurity from disrupting the life of Israel. The great threat to holiness that can jeopardize the presence of Yahweh in the community of Israel is to create a

disorder by mixing things in a way that confuse and distort². The antidote to such confusion is to sort out and make distinctions so that nothing is wrongly mixed that will disturb the order that belongs to the holiness of the Creator. The purity impulse is thus motivated fundamentally by the desire to make demarcations between the sacred and the profane.

The teaching of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament however, lifted the meaning of purity from ceremonial/ritual into the moral and spiritual sphere. Jesus transferred the state of defilement and of purity entirely from outer to the inner man¹⁴. Purity becomes a state of heart reserved completely for God and freed from all worldly distractions. Purity begins within and extends outwards to the entire life, cleansing all the centers of living and controlling all the movements of body and spirit¹⁵. It should be noted that the attitude of Jesus is not that such ritual observances are wrong, but that they were receiving a disproportionate attention, to the neglect of the things which really matter. However, observing the sanitary rules of hand washing, regular bathing and keeping the environment clean is now more necessary and very essential in Nigeria than it was in Jesus' days. With the environmental pollution, air pollution and filth everywhere in most part of the nation physical hygiene becomes very important. The paper brings to light the relevance of physical purity to human health and establishes the fact that recognition and avoidance of sin and sinful behavior is a criterion for spiritual health just as the provision of adequate sanitation systems and safe drinking water is essential for the prevention of epidemics and control of contagious diseases.

The Concepts of Purity among the Jews

The source of the purity impulse begins in the Decalogue but finds its clearest expositions in Leviticus where the priestly purity rules and rituals are found⁵. Through the Priesthood, Yahweh outlines procedures for handling a variety of potential contaminants in the life of Israel: food (Leviticus 11), child birth (Leviticus 12), infectious skin diseases (Leviticus 13-14), hygiene (Leviticus 13-14), menstrual blood and bodily discharges (Leviticus 15) sexual activity (Leviticus 18). The focus of this tradition of holiness

which is rooted in the first three commands of the Decalogue is that those zones of life that are inhabited by Yahweh in an intense way must be kept pure and uncontaminated⁶. God is holy, his chosen people must be holy, and nothing that defiles must enter into the presence of the holy God. In Israel then, as in other human societies, the religious/symbolic system is organized first and foremost as a defense against the violence of contagion and the impurity of the confused⁷. Everyday life therefore requires taboos relating to pollution and warding off the threatened danger which pollution represents. People reject pollution to the point of avoiding even simple contact or touching, since the impure is so violent as to be contagious⁸. The Jews as a nation, might not have survived their time in the wilderness, or the many other vicissitudes through which they passed, without their sanitary 'code' which deals with public hygiene, water supply, sewage disposal, inspection and selection of food and control of infectious diseases⁹. Cleanliness and hygiene measures strengthen the body against disease by avoiding excessive contact with damaging elements. Strengthening the mind is just as important as strengthening the body because total health includes psychological health. The mind is ruled by the same principle as the body; it needs correct nutrition and must be protected against negative or harmful influences (impurities). This is essential for one to be able to resist external attacks from germs, pollution and accidents.

The Jewish practice of ceremonial washing of the hands before meals was a ritual act, intended to remove the defilement incurred by contact with the Gentiles¹⁰. On arrival from the street/market, the Israelites must undertake an ablution for purification and maintain a clean and healthy environment¹¹. The unclean would have to wash his body and clothes especially if he had touched a corpse. Ablution in Israel was a vital environmental measure to ensure cleanliness.¹² Mark's account illustrates the meticulous care with which the rule was carried out, but shows also that like other good customs, this practice had degenerated into formalism; concern for the minute details of ceremonial had supplanted genuine religious faith and devotion¹³.

Historically, Christian thinkers have effectively utilized a discourse of disease and filth to demarcate doctrinal deviancy: heretics are portrayed as doctrinally, morally, physically and mentally ill and heresy is viewed as illness as well as the cause of illness³. Correspondingly, the symbolic power of purity efficiently underpinned claims to truth and authority and clarified the process of self-definition⁴.

An overwhelming number of people are suffering from preventable contagious diseases. Good health is founded on principles determined by sufficient and balanced diet, sufficient physical exercise, adequate physical and mental hygiene and an awareness of the mechanisms of disease and how to prevent them or how to prepare the body to resist disease. Most of the time the human mind is full of evil thoughts, unforgiving spirit, anger, hatred, vengeance etc which combine with poor eating habits and lifestyle to invite diseases such as hypertension, heart attack, diabetes, cancer and depression into the human body. Emotions such as fear, bitterness, guilt, shame and resentment slowly weakens the body and the immune systems while poor hygiene and unclean environment make one susceptible to contagious diseases.

Contagious Diseases and Physical Purity

Contagious diseases are those communicable diseases that are transmitted directly from the patient to a susceptible individual¹⁶. They are spread through the air, skin-to-skin contact, genital-to-genital contact, housefly and fingers. Contagious diseases can also be transmitted through fomites.

Fomites are the inanimate objects like clothes, combs, toys, watch, books, etc used by a patient.¹⁷ They get contaminated with the organisms shed by the patient. Their handling by a susceptible person results in infection. Diseases such as measles, chickenpox, conjunctivitis and scabies can spread through fomites. Fingers also contribute to the spread of gastrointestinal infections. They get smeared with feces from anal washing following defecation; the organisms in the feces are then transferred to water or food with which the fingers come into contact.

In addition, diseases like diphtheria and tuberculosis are transmitted through droplets of respiratory secretion¹⁸. When the patient coughs, the droplets escape his nose and mouth as a spray. When the host breathes this spray, the organisms enter his respiratory tract and produce infection. Alternatively, the droplets of respiratory secretion discharged by a patient adhere to dust particles and settle down to the floor of the room used by the patient. They are called “droplet dust”¹⁹ subsequently; wind currents blow the droplet dust up and disperse them in the indoor atmosphere. Any person who inhales the air contracts the infection.

The control and prevention of these diseases depend largely on cleanliness. Physical purity is very important in preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting physical health and efficiency. Most sicknesses are self-inflicted, either by willful, destructive habits or by ignorance. “Much of the money invested in building hospitals and buying latest medical equipment could be saved if people would follow simple rules for health, such as drinking safe water, eating wholesome foods and breathing clean air.”²⁰ Cleanliness in the home and an improved environmental sanitation promote and safeguard people’s health. Health is a basic human right and very essential for social and economic development. It is a resource for everyday life, a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. Many of the interventions required for promoting health begin at home through changes in individual behavior and lifestyle, in families and households²¹.

The risk factors associated with diseases, like cholera, viral hepatitis A, typhoid fever, tuberculosis, influenza, diarrhea, food poison, skin infections and others, relate to poor personal hygiene, failure to manage and dispose of wastes properly, poor sanitary disposal of excreta, inadequate ventilation in residential houses, crowded rooms and dirty environment. According to Werner, germs and worms (or their eggs) are passed by the thousands in the stools or faeces of infected persons. These are carried from the feces of one person to the mouth of another by dirty fingers or contaminated food or water²². From the very moment of birth, human beings are assaulted by countless micro-organisms from

the environment which penetrate the body through natural orifices (mouth, nose, ears, and genitalia) or multiply in certain vulnerable areas²³. All the organism's orifices and small cuts which may occur in the skin are the main penetration routes for harmful micro organisms. Appropriate protection and disinfection of these routes are the best prevention against contagious diseases.

Hygiene education in contemporary time stresses the need to wash hands before preparing food and after using the toilet. The importance of washing hands after going to toilet is to help prevent diarrhea disease. Faeces must be deposited in such a way that it does not contaminate water, milk or food. People must not defecate in open fields, houseflies should be controlled.

Foods and fruits must be kept away from flies. Patients of tuberculosis and diphtheria must avoid spitting on the floor and cover their nose and mouth while coughing or sneezing. Sexually transmitted infections could be controlled by the avoidance of sexual promiscuity. The primary prevention of contagious diseases is to make people strong in body and mind and provide them with an environment, at home, at work, and at places of recreation, free of harmful substances and influences. Availability of air that is free of pollutants, water that is safe for drinking and soil which is free of harmful chemical and parasitological agents are guarantee of good health.

Purity and Table Fellowship among the Jews

The importance of table fellowship in the Ancient Near East cannot be over-emphasized. In Israel everyday meal times were highly complex events in which social value, boundaries, status and hierarchies were reinforced.²⁴ Centers of consumption were centers of purity, hence certain persons based upon appraisals of contagion, were denied table-fellowship and access to sacred spaces.

The Pharisees exhorted other Jews to intensify their holiness and sense of unique identity by voluntarily living according to the priestly laws of ritual purity everyday of the year; they sought to renew Israel by shifting the locus of holiness to their homes²⁵.

This resulted in a special focus on the purity of one's everyday food and of one's companions at every meal. The Pharisees regarded their tables at home as surrogates for the Lord's altar in the Temple in Jerusalem and therefore strove to maintain in their households and among their eating companions, the state of ritual purity required of priests in Temple service²⁶. They therefore insisted on eating only with companions who had 'undefiled hands' that is, persons in a state of ritual purity.

The Text and Context of Mark 7:1-7

Kai sunagountai proV auton oi Farisaioi kai tineV tw n grammatewn elqonteV apo Ierosolumwn. Kai idonteV tinastwn maqhtwn autou oti koinaiV cersin, tout estin aniptoiv, esqiousin touV artouV oi gar Farisaioi kai panteV oi Ioudaioi ean mh pugmh niqwntai taV ceiras ouk esqiousin kratountesn thn paradysin tw n prebuterwn, kai ap' agoraV eav mh baptiswntai ouk estousin, kai alla polla estin a parelabon kratein, baptis mouV pothriwn kai xestwn kai calkiwn [kai klinwn] kai eperwtwsin auton oi Farisaioi kai oi grammateiv, Dia ti ou peripatusin oi maqhtai sou kata thn paradysin tw n presbuterwn, alla koinaiV cersin esqiousin ton arton;

Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the Scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze). And the Pharisees and the Scribes asked him "why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?"

The early history of Jewish hand washing at meal times is largely unknown²⁷. The presence of the pericope in Mark's and Matthew's gospels can only be explained on the assumption that some Jews at least had adopted the custom in the pre-70AD period. According to Mark 7 such hand washing was required by the "tradition of the elders". Tradition is *paradosiV* from the word *paradidomi* which means "to give into the hands of another, to deliver something to keep". As it is used here, tradition refers to instructions handed down from one generation to another, which are to be observed by the succeeding generations. The tradition of

the elders consisted of oral law originated by the Jewish religious leaders. The rabbis held that disobedience to it was a mortal sin thus a real issue is raised in the text between the Pharisees and Jesus. The validity for Christians of the Scribal tradition was a living issue between the Church and Synagogue in the early period. Its neglect is thus seen as a violation, not of Scriptural Law, but of the extra biblical tradition adopted by the Pharisees²⁸. For hand washing to be required as a purification ritual before each meal, hands must be both regarded as susceptible to defilement not affecting the rest of the body and routinely assumed to be so defiled²⁹. Dake explained that the washing of hands was supposed to get rid of *Shibta*, an evil spirit which sit upon hands at night. The Israelites were instructed to keep their environment clean and pure, void of all filthiness and abomination. They were cautioned greatly to avoid carcasses. The Pharisees in order to remove the consequences of possible defilement on all occasions prescribed a ceremonial washing of hands and cups etc. before meals as an additional safeguard of the law. Purifications were common to many other religions. Akanni argues that Islam requests that the body be cleaned of all forms of impurity as an accompaniment of the purification of the soul upon which man's salvation is anchored. "By enjoining cleanliness of the body upon man, Islam awakes him to the realization of the fact that when impurities on the body of a man produce such unhealthy effects on his physical being, and corrode his mental health, how miserable his life would be when his soul is polluted with impurities. The process of the purification of the soul should therefore, start with the purification of the body"³⁰. Leviticus 15:11 and rabbinic tradition assume the uncleanness of hands because they are liable to touch what is unclean. Hands are a vehicle for germs which in most cases are the cause of infections. "They saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed." (Mark 7:2). The word *koinos* translated 'defiled' in Mark 7:2 literally means 'common' or 'secular' as opposed to 'holy', 'the profane' as opposed to the 'hallowed' or the 'sacred'. The common or secular was not in and by itself unclean, but became 'impure' in circumstances where a legal rule required ritual cleansing or consecration³¹. It is therefore the notion that God comes only to the man who is already sacred in the ritual

sense that Jesus corrected in the passage and not really the need to wash hands before eating. Hand washing after visiting public places like market or social gatherings becomes more necessary today than in Jesus times, not because of defilement as a result of mingling with people of any particular race but having touched different things, meats, fish and fruits that have been contaminated through the perching of flies and insects, railings that hundreds of people rest on daily etc, eating with unwashed hands become a contagion.

The word *pugmh*, though left un-translated by Revised Standard Version because of its uncertain meaning, literally means ‘with the fist’. Whether it refers to rubbing the fist on the palm of the hand or to pouring water over the clenched fist, or to wash up to the wrist is not easy to determine³². The explanation is rather to be sought in the fact that according to Jewish custom, different sorts of ritual washing were required for different degrees of impurity. In the Talmud, a distinction is made between ‘dipping up to the wrist’ which is a minor ablution and the more serious ‘plunging up to the wrist’ for which a large quantity of water was required. It seems likely that *pugmh niqwntai* is equivalent to the former while *baptiswntai* in the next verse is equivalent to the latter. Wuest is of the view that the individual rubs one hand and the arm up to the elbow with the other hand clenched. He rubs the palm of one hand with the other closed, so as to make sure that the part that touched the food would be clean³³. Jesus would not have condemned a hand washing done for the purpose of personal, physical cleanliness.

“And when they come from the market place they do not eat unless they purify themselves and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze” (Mark 7:4). Perhaps Jesus might have commended the Jews if all these were done for the purpose of hygiene. There is a controversy among textual critics as to whether the original manuscript had *rantizo* “to sprinkle” or baptize “to immerse”. *Rantiswntai* is read by NB and a few minuscules but the majority of other manuscripts has *baptiswntai*.

Baptiswntai is strongly attested and the alteration to *rantiswntai* can perhaps be explained as due to the difficulty which *Baptiswntai* would probably present to anyone who was unfamiliar with the Jewish custom. The word *Baptiswntai* is probably to be explained as denoting the more thorough form of ritual washing, the plunging in a basin containing a large quantity of water necessitated by the defiling contacts of the market-place. However the word “unwashed” of verse 2 and “wash” of verse 3 are the translation of *nipto* “to wash” and the “washing” of these verses refers to the same act as the “washing” of verse 4. The statement proceeds by way of climax before eating they wash the hands always; when they come from market they take a bath before eating. As good as these practices are if done for the right purpose of personal hygiene, Jesus condemned it because of the wrong motif behind it.

The citation from Isaiah 29:13, in Mark 7:6-7 is a typical prophetic denunciation of outward observance of religious ordinances that is not accompanied by total life-commitment to the one who is the true object of religious devotion³⁴. Concentration upon external acts of piety to the neglect of true holiness is equated with submission to a scribal tradition that is of human invention (the precepts of men; the tradition of men). Such submission means forsaking the true commandment of God which requires something immeasurably greater and deeper than surface efforts to satisfy him. Jesus called them hypocrites. “... well did Isaiah prophesy of you, the hypocrites,...” The use of the definite article particularized the Pharisees as outstanding hypocrites. The word *upokrithç* is made up of *hupo* “under” and *krinw* “to judge” and referred originally to “one who judged from under the cover of a mask” assuming an identity and a character which he was not³⁵. The Pharisees were religious actors, they pretended to be on the outside what they were not on the inside, that was why Jesus condemned their action. They disregard, *afiemi*, and abandon the commandment of God while they kept a powerful grip *kratw*, on the traditions carefully and faithfully keeping those things delivered by men for them to observe. They seem to be conscious

of physical purity as basis for holiness whereas they are full of moral impurity and deceptions which is the real contagion. Hypocrisy is both contagious and infectious hence Jesus condemned it. The controversy Jesus had with the Pharisees is that their external behavior and comportment, appear all right but their hearts are quite different.

Spiritual Pollutants in Mark

In several episodes in Mark there is a demonstration of Jesus' power over the contagion system³⁶. In chapter 1 Jesus triumphed over the contagion system on two occasions; in verse 23 He heals a man with an 'unclean' spirit and in verse 40, he encountered a man with leprosy – an infectious skin disease marking the man as "unclean". Jesus touched the man and said 'be clean'. Here the directionality of pollution was reversed; rather than the unclean polluting the clean, in Jesus' touch, the clean made the polluted pure³⁷. Jesus' contact with the unclean cleanses rather than pollutes. In chapter 2 of Mark, Jesus admitted "unclean" persons (tax collectors and sinners) to table-fellowship. The table of these 'sinners' was considered to be a source of pollution, and every Jew who would be clean must steer clear of it, if he is not to be polluted.³⁸ Jesus by admitting the 'unclean' to his table was subverting the contagion system of righteousness.

In Mark 7 Jesus and the Pharisees explicitly debate issues of purity and contamination. The Pharisees observed that Jesus' disciples were eating with 'unwashed' hands and queried Jesus; he then established the true source of spiritual pollution.

Jesus sees the evil machinations in the heart of man as the true source of spiritual contamination rather than dirty hands at dinner or mingling with Gentiles. Spiritual purity has to do with the heart. Jesus took time to explain this fact in verses 18-23. The intention is to affirm that the eating, digesting and excreting of food is a wholly physical process (it can only affect the physical health of man) it has nothing to do with the quality of a man's spiritual life. "Are ye so without understanding also?" (Verse 18) It was a cause of disappointment to Jesus that his own disciples were still under the spell of the Pharisaic theological tradition.

They had been trained in Judaism, in which the distinction between clean and unclean is ingrained, and could not understand a statement abrogating this³⁹. Jesus pointed out that “if it is the inward that purifies it is also the inward that defiles; it is the terrible chemistry of the evil heart, distilling poisons that ruin a life⁴⁰”.

The real spiritual pollutants are given in the list of vices in verses 21-22. Though the list is an adoption of an ethical terminology by the early Christian church, modified by the scriptures and by the tradition of Jesus teaching⁴¹, it presents the real contagion behind both spiritual and physical illnesses. “Evil thoughts” *oi dialogismoi oi kakoi*. The word ‘thoughts’ carries the idea of discussion or debate with an under-thought of suspicion or doubt, either in one’s own mind or with another. ‘Evil’ is *kakos* “of a bad nature, not such as it ought to be, base, wrong, wicked, reprehensible’. ‘Covetings’ is *pleonexia* – a greedy desire to have more, avarice. ‘Wickedness’ is *poneria* – depravity, in iniquity. The word speaks of wickedness not merely in the abstract but active; it has the idea of being dangerous, destructive, and pernicious. *Kakoç* speaks of wickedness in active opposition to the good. ‘Lasciviousness or licentiousness is *aselgeia*. It has been defined as unrestrained sexual instinct, lawless insolence and wantonness. “Evil eye” – *ofqalmos poneroç* refers to a jealous or grudging attitude, envy, mischief-working eye.

Blasfemia is slander. It does not necessarily speak of blasphemy against God rather it is used of reviling, calumny, evil-speaking in general, malicious misrepresentation. ‘Pride’ is *upere fania* from *uper* – above and *fainesqai* to show one’s self. It has been described as a sin of an uplifted heart against god and man, holding one’s head high above others. “Foolishness” is *afrosune* lack of sense, folly, and senselessness. These vices according to Jesus are the real pollutants that defile man and they proceed from within. These are spiritual impurity, contagion which defile. They make man both physically and spiritually sick and unhealthy. A person who struggles consistently with evil thought, covetousness, pride and perniciousness, is prone to high blood pressure while the man/woman who commits adultery or fornication lives in danger of STDs and HIV/AIDS. Spiritual pollutants endanger a man’s

of the numerous advancements in medical science, as long as people continue to choose foolish lifestyle, they will continue to be plagued by diseases⁴².

Holiness means wholeness, soundness. Holiness and health go hand in glove. A dirty environment, poor personal hygiene and a life full of vices bring sicknesses and afflictions more than any other thing. Physical and spiritual purity are the provenance of healing and holiness. Holiness is a great defense against disease. The contagion of sin hinders healing than anything else.

Conclusion

Decency and cleanliness prevent the spread of diseases and promote health. Healing has been an important element in the proclamation of the Gospel from the very beginnings of Christianity. Jesus healed and ordered his disciple to do likewise in order to make the presence of the kingdom of God known, seen and experienced. Grundmann however has observed that Christian medical work could no longer remain content with simply benefiting suffering individuals and running costly hospitals; rather it needed to address the need for proper nourishment and hygienic living conditions, without which people would continue to become sick⁴³. Schools and churches should introduce/embark on hygiene education which allow people to become better informed or aware of the influences affecting their health and enables people to make positive behavior changes. There is need to prevent the proliferation of vectors that might breed in domestic waste in our environment. Above all God is the source of all true healing. To be physically and spiritually whole, man must be right with God. If we cleanse ourselves of filthy actions as much as we cleanse our bodies and environment every day, we will be pure and healthy. Unclean thoughts, words and deeds must be seen as contagions which defile and afflict the body as much as physical wastes and pollutions. Sin must be put away in order to attain the condition of holiness that God demands. Outward holiness without corresponding inward transformation of character will not enhance a healthy lifestyle which is fundamental both for preventing and curing contagious diseases.

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