

# Love and Grubbiness

*A sermon on Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; James 1:17-27; Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9 & Song of Songs 2:8-13  
by Nathan Nettleton, 1 September 2024*

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## Message

God's love for us is so all-consuming that he accepts us as soon as we accept him and is happy for our behaviours to be sorted out in the transforming experience of love.

## Sermon

One of the fears that grips many people in our churches these days is that traditional concepts of right and wrong seem to be breaking down. Once upon a time, right was right, and wrong was wrong, and everybody knew the difference. And because we knew, it was pretty straightforward to tell who was respectable and who was disreputable and how to treat them.

But now it all seems to have changed. Now people don't seem to accept the old norms or the authorities on which they were founded. Now people argue that what's wrong for some is okay for others, and that what's right in one context might be pretty dubious in another context. Now even Christians argue that most of our perceptions of right and wrong are socially constructed and therefore culturally specific, and perhaps there are no absolutes, or at least very few.

It all leaves many people feeling very insecure. Isn't there anything solid under our feet? How are you supposed to know what you can and can't do? How are you supposed to know who are the godly people and who aren't? How are you supposed to know where you stand with God yourself?

Actually, this experience of confusion and uncertainty may not be all that new. It sounds to me like the same thing was going on for the devout religious people who were worried about the behaviour of Jesus's disciples in our gospel reading a few minutes ago. "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?" they ask. "Why do they not comply with the traditional understandings of right and wrong? There is a right way to prepare to eat, and your disciples are not following it. They are eating with defiled hands. Why?"

It is a strangely intriguing example, actually. The Church has often taught that there was a clear distinction between the ritual laws and the moral laws, and that with the coming of Jesus, the ritual law is done away with and the moral law is purified and continues to hold true. And it has often been said that one of the ways you can tell the difference, if in doubt, was that the moral law could be deduced on practical grounds – it made sense to live that way. So, for example, many of those who argue that homosexual lovemaking is morally wrong defend their position by arguing that it is unhygienic and physically risky.

But in the example in today's reading, this action which seems to be being dismissed as a superfluous little bit of ritual tradition is actually something we all still teach our kids because it is good basic hygiene. "Wash your hands before you come to the table." What could be wrong with that? In the early days of covid, obsessively washing your hands was a basic health strategy that quickly came to be seen in moral terms. If you didn't scrupulously follow the guidelines, you were failing to exhibit love and care for your potentially vulnerable

neighbours. So it seems to be clearly ticking the boxes for easily explainable moral law, but Jesus isn't treating it that way.

On the other hand, to return to the people who say homosexual lovemaking is morally wrong because it's unhygienic, not only are they failing to recognise that there is nothing that homosexuals do in bed that isn't also done by lots of heterosexual couples, but if you explain basic straight sex to an eight year old you will quickly be informed that that sounds disgusting and totally unhygienic too!

Back when my nephew was eight years old, his dad sat down to ask him how he was feeling about the new little sister who was on the way, and to explain that they hadn't really planned on this pregnancy and it was a bit of an accident. And with revulsion only too clear in his voice, the eight year old said, "Dad, I know how it happens, and you can't do that by accident!"

Sex is surely the greatest minefield in this time of changing perceptions of right and wrong. It is where many choose to draw their line in the sand. Once upon a time it was all clear, and everybody knew the rules. Once upon a time one of the rules was that you didn't talk about sex – even good married faithful sex – in polite company.

Which begs the question tonight, what is the Song of Songs doing in our Bible?! Our first reading tonight, and the psalm that followed it are pieces of highly erotic love poetry. And they are by no means the raciest examples. If you made a faithful-to-the-text movie of the Song of Songs, you'd have to be very careful about your camera angles to avoid an X rating. This is very sexy stuff. Forget about defiled hands; this is the sort of stuff they used to tell us led to defiled minds. So if there is something grubby about talking too enthusiastically about sex, what is it doing in the Bible?

Well, the defenders of traditional morality would say that it is not in the Bible because it is sexy; it is in the Bible because it is an allegory of God's intense love for his people. Now at one level, that is almost certainly true. The Song of Songs actually doesn't say anything about God at all, but its traditional use as an allegory of God's passionate desire for us is what prevented it from being dropped from the Bible. But even so, we don't allegorise from evil to illustrate good. If God is happy for hot steamy erotic desire to be an illustration of God's love for us, then that is also giving the thumbs up to hot steamy sex, at least in its appropriate relational context.

Now when we look at our gospel story and this erotic poetry together, there are some obvious implications for how Jesus might allow us to rethink some of the traditional teachings on sexual morality, but our church's support for same-sex relationships is sufficiently clear that I probably don't need to go over it at every opportunity. And besides, there is something else jumping out at me this time that I want to point out.

You see, in his stinging critique of the pharisees' question about washing hands, Jesus quotes a scripture passage that says, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Their hearts are far from me. And in the love poetry from the psalm, we heard talk of a "heart overflowing". And I reckon that where our hearts are at is important to God in a way that we haven't been used to thinking about.

You see, the pharisees were confident that they were pleasing God because they were religiously complying with everything they knew God wished of them. If you listened to the podcast that Jen circulated during the week, you won't need me to tell you that the Sunday School depiction of the Pharisees as always the bad guys is a total crock. Of the various Jewish groups in those days, the Pharisees were by far the ones with the most in common with Jesus. The fact that Jesus often argued with them doesn't mean he thought they were evil. In Jewish culture, then as now, the capacity to have an argument with someone is more or less a sign of respect and good relations.

But for any group who are intent on complying with everything they believe God requires of them, there is the danger of it fossilising into mere compliance. And no lover wants a partner who just stoically and pedantically complies with their wishes. We want lovers who burn with desire for us and hunger for us body and soul, and who are so eagerly expressing love that they don't stop to think about whether each expression of love is in strict compliance with some published list of wishes. And that is what God longs for from us.

God yearns for our passion. Have you ever had the experience of a lover doing something you had made known you wanted, but doing it with such a different attitude from what you hoped that you ended up feeling rejected or ridiculed instead of blessed? That is what Jesus is suggesting God feels like when we carefully comply with biblical rules but don't love God with the fierce passion with which God hungers for intimate communion with us.

The good news is, though, that when God feels rejected by us in such ways, the fiery passion is undiminished. With us, such experiences can turn to anger and bitterness and resentment. The fire turns dark and threatening. But as our reading from the letter of James said, God is the "Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

The fiery light always burns bright in God. It never turns dark and vengeful, for God has no dark side, no dangerous shadow. But surely that is all the more reason for us to surrender to the blazing light of God's love, and love God with the same unrestrained passion, and let the rules take care of themselves in the dance of love.

But we find that hard, don't we? We are so used to thinking of our relationship with God as some sort of exam, where we have to achieve a suitable moral grade before we can be accepted into God's salvation. It goes against all our expectations that God might love us so much that he would save us and forgive us first and be happy for our behaviour to sort itself out in the ongoing dance of love.

And we are so addicted to our rules, even if we don't think of them as rules. We are so used to dividing people up into the acceptable and the unacceptable on the basis of our expectations about behaviour or attitudes, and we are so blind to the ways we do it most of the time. We can always see how other people are being legalistic, but we think our rules or expectations are important principles and good sense.

In the last decade or so it seems that those of us at the more progressive end of the theological and political spectrums have increasingly become just as bad as those of us on the conservative ends in this regard. We have become more and more puritan and less and less tolerant of people who don't see things our way, or who are just a bit behind us in the evolution of their views. People get cancelled or just quietly shunned or distanced because

they haven't totally caught up with this month's compulsory orthodoxy. And when that happens, the rules inevitably fossilise and become lifeless because the compliance is no longer coming from a place of joy and passion and love, but from fear of the social consequences.

Once that happens, it makes no difference whether your rules are about establishing patriarchal male headship or the necessity of using feminine images of God. They are equally tragic and misguided if practised with dead loveless hearts.

It makes no difference whether your rules insist on traditional sexual morality or on the full inclusion of LGBTI+ people in the life of the church, they are equally missing the mark if they are complied with from fear of stepping out of line instead of flowing naturally from your experience of being drenched in the outrageous grace of God and just exploding with love and joy.

It makes no difference whether your rules insist on honouring legitimate government or on engaging in civil disobedience in the fight for justice and peace, they are equally far from what God longs for if they become restrictive dogmas and not the expressions of hearts that are burning with love for God and for all humanity.

It is not that there is no value in communal understandings, or in laws or rituals or traditional practices. We know that Jesus was not simply and clearly dismissive of them, because the Church debated them for a generation after his ascension, and if he had been unambiguously dismissive of them, there would have been nothing to debate.

But washing your hands was never meant to be something that made you pure in the eyes of God. It was a traditional practice that was both good hygiene and a reminder to pray for the cleansing of your heart that you might love more purely.

Our congregational covenant is intended to work the same way. If we start getting legalistic about it and watching one another to see who is falling short of it, then it will be a useless abomination that will defile our hearts and extinguish the spark of love. But if we can see it as a set of practices which are lived in the spirit of what the Apostle James called "the law of liberty", and which are embraced with the hope that they will fuel the fire in our hearts, then it may be set free to lead us deeper into the intimate communion into which God would woo us.

The bottom line is that God is not much concerned with whether you are presently right wing or left wing, gay or straight, feminist or chauvinist, fundamentalist or liberal, militaristic or gandhian, overindulgent or as frugal as a hermit, homophobic, arachnophobic, or phobophobic. God loves you passionately and intensely and extravagantly and God longs for you to surrender to that love and to reciprocate that love with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength.

And if you are able to truly surrender to that love, and live and dance in that love, and learn to love others as God loves, then all the other stuff will sort itself out in the dance and you won't any longer fear shaky boundaries and shifting moral sands, because the ground under your feet will be the rock solid ground of God's all-consuming love.