

# In Reverse

## Matthew 15:15-20 ; Mark 7:18

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#### I. Missed The Point vs. 15-16 ; Matthew 5:11

- a. Peter Needed Explanations
- b. Still lack Understanding
  - i. becomes ἀκμήν ('still'), softening the comparison with the Pharisees and scribes and, along with the coming explanation (vv. 17–20), pointing to the temporary nature of the disciples' failure to understand
  - ii. Understand- one who lacks σύνεσις is void of understanding, *senseless, foolish*, implying also a lack of high moral quality
  - iii. The disciples' obtuseness is heightened because, given the nature of Jesus' reply, they apparently do not pick up even on all of the cognitive level of meaning. Or, perhaps more likely, they do understand Jesus' point but recognize that its implications are so radical that they want to make sure of what Jesus has in mind.
  - iv. The disciples had already been initiated into the secrets of the kingdom (13:11) expressed through parables and had affirmed that they had understood "all these things" (13:51). Yet despite the fundamental importance of understanding (cf. 13:23), they were unable to understand what Jesus was saying (cf. the same failure in connection with the teaching of the Pharisees in 16:9–12).

#### II. Outside In v. 17

- a. Mouth
  - i. The tendency to speak of the mouth as acting independently, by synecdoche or ignorance of physiology,
- b. Eliminated - *toilet, latrine, goes into the toilet*
  - i. What is ingested by humans (τὸ εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς τὸ στόμα, "what goes into the mouth") passes through "the dietary tract" (τὴν κοιλίαν) and into the "latrine" (ἀφεδρῶνα). Food is accordingly of little consequence to the spiritual state of a person
  - ii. From this point we can look back to v. 17 and see more clearly that the role of the contrast of stomach and heart is to make the point that what reaches only the stomach cannot affect the purity of the heart, which is a matter of much more profound importance than is the ritual purity of the body

- c. Over against the trio of hands, food (via the mouth), and the whole person, related to ritual impurity, is set the trio of heart, deeds (often via the mouth), and the whole person, related to moral impurity. Starting from defiled hands, the Pharisees and scribes thought that the last state was worse than the first if food was consumed without washing the hands.
- d. The answer is a straightforward 'No'. What the Pharisees and scribes appeal to in v. 2 is implicitly identified in v. 3 as based on tradition and not on the commandment of God. And v. 11 has made clear that, in the desire to push back the boundaries of the realm within which Jewish people typically identified the requirements of their obedience to God, the Pharisees and scribes were moving in the wrong direction.

### III. Inside Out vs. 18-20

- a. Heart to Mouth
  - i. Proceed – to come forth from, *come/go out, proceed*, in imagery, of things, words, or thoughts
    - 1. Mouth
  - ii. Heart – As seat of inner life in contrast to mouth or lips, which either give expression to the inner life or deny it Mt 15:8; Mk 7:6 (both Is 29:13); Mt 15:18
  - iii. Starting from a defiled heart, the Matthean Jesus suggests that the last state is worse than the first if the heart, not first purified, is given free rein (in part through the mouth) to allow evil inclinations to mature into violations of the Ten Commandments.
  - iv. In 15:18 Matthew seems to be following the trail of the transfer of uncleanness from the heart and through the mouth (heading out). This is no doubt meant to be the inverse of the track implicitly identified by the Pharisees and scribes as from the hands (to the food) and through the mouth (heading in). Matthew has now provided an image in which the idea of the heart as being pure or impure is linked with that of becoming impure through immoral deeds: people become impure from their immoral deeds as the impurity of the heart flows out (often via the mouth) to produce the deeds. Presumably the unstated assumption here is that one is in impurity-producing contact with one's own deeds.
  - v. The juxtaposition of 'mouth' and 'heart' creates a cross link to 12:34 ('out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks'). The same close correlation of 'mouth' and 'heart' is evident in Rom. 10:8–10; 2 Cor. 6:11. The link with the heart is the new thing compared to Mt. 15:11. Matthew has already multiply signalled the importance of the heart,<sup>1717</sup> most recently in the citation of Is. 29:13 in v. 8. As discussed at 5:8, the 'heart' locates the core identity of a person, that place from which one feels and

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<sup>1717</sup> Mt. 5:8, 28; 6:21; 9:4; 11:29; 12:34; 13:15, 19; 15:8; yet to come, 18:35; 22:37.

thinks and determines one's actions. What involves the heart is self-evidently of much greater significance than what involves only the stomach. A discussion of how the defilement is understood to work is reserved for v. 20, after the list of actual offences has been considered.

b. Defile

- i. In connection with the OT idea of material holiness it is used in Ac. 21:28 for the profaning of the temple by bringing in the uncircumcised and in Hb. 9:13 for ritually unclean things (
- ii. *make common or impure, defile* where we read that the capacity for fellowship with God is destroyed, not by material uncleanness (foods, hands), but only by personal sin
- iii. Morally impure behavior and speech, however, always harms oneself and others and remains an offense to God (v. 18).
- iv. By direct contrast, "the things that come out of the mouth" (τὰ δὲ ἐκπορευόμενα ἐκ τοῦ στόματος), i.e., the words one speaks, do defile a person (cf. v. 11; cf. Jas 3:1–11). The words come ἐκ τῆς καρδίας, "from the heart," and thus have to do with the very nature of a person (see 12:34–35). And "from the heart" comes a veritable stream of wickedness.

c. Source Heart

- i. Evil Thoughts -the evil impulse
- ii. Although the list opens with 'evil designs' (the only double-membered entry) it goes on to cite six concrete actions. Perhaps implicit is the truth that behind every public evil there lurk the sinful, wicked thoughts which are its roots (cf. Gen 6:5). Indeed, maybe διαλογισμοὶ πονηροί is Matthew's Greek equivalent for the *yēṣer hārā*, evil impulse, which the rabbis generally located in the heart.
- iii. Given, however, that the following items are all concrete acts, it is probably best still to treat 'evil inclinations' as separate, perhaps 'evil inclinations [and then out of these] acts of murder
- iv. Matthew has rearranged the Markan list as follows. 'Acts of murder' is promoted to first place (third in Mark) and 'acts of adultery' to second (fourth in Mark), while 'acts of sexual immorality' is moved back to third (first in Mark). This gives Matthew the order of the first set of three antitheses in 5:21–32
- v. Jesus' illustrations combine in sequence the Sixth through the Ninth Commandments of the Decalogue (Exod 20:13–16). These are introduced by general sins of the thought life and supplemented by the sins of sexual immorality (*porneia*), naturally associated with adultery, and of *blasphemies* (a better rendering of Greek *blasphemiai* than "slander"), naturally linked with false testimony (v. 19). Verse 20b brings the discussion back full circle to the original charge of v. 2 and makes it plain that God's people no longer need to observe ritual hand washing.
- vi. Matthew sticks with matters which in Jewish terms would not only be immoral but also criminal, and all his items relate to the Ten

Commandments. Two—positions two and three—relate to the adultery commandment, and two—positions five and six—relate to the false witness commandment (thus two sets of three). This means that he deals with the four Commandments from murder to false witness in the order of the Ten Commandments (honouring of parents, which comes before murder, has been addressed in vv. 3–6).

1. Murders
2. Adulteries
3. Fornications
4. Thefts
5. False Witness
6. Slanders

- a. Matthew provides only a representative list of seven items (cf. Mark's thirteen), with one item, ψευδομαρτυρία, "lies," not from Mark's list, probably thought by Matthew to be particularly appropriate to things from the heart uttered by the mouth

- d. Not the Hands or Mouth

## Cross References

Proverbs 15:4 – A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit (NASU)

Matthew 15:18 - "But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. (NASU)

Ephesians 5:3-4 - But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; 4 and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. (NASU)

Matthew 12:36-37 - "But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. 37 "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." NASU

Proverbs 17:27-28 - He who restrains his words has knowledge, And he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. 28 Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; When he closes his lips, he is considered prudent. NASU

Ephesians 4:29-30; Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. NASU

## Word Studies

Understand – one who lacks σύνεσις is **void of understanding, senseless, foolish**, implying also a lack of high moral quality<sup>2</sup>

Eliminated- **toilet, latrine, goes into the toilet**

Proceed – **to come forth from, come/go out, proceed**, in imagery, of things, words, or thoughts<sup>3</sup>

Mouth- The tendency to speak of the mouth as acting independently, by synecdoche or ignorance of physiology, is not as marked as in the case of lip. This may be because the Heb. did not distinguish clearly between the supposed functions of the internal organs, and the mouth, being partly internal, was obviously connected with them (see \*HEART and cf. Pr. 16:23 where *peh* is translated in RS<sup>4</sup>v as ‘speech’).<sup>5</sup>

Heart – As seat of inner life in contrast to mouth or lips, which either give expression to the inner life or deny it **Mt 15:8; Mk 7:6** (both Is 29:13); **Mt 15:18**<sup>6</sup>

**Defile** – In connection with the O<sup>7</sup>T idea of material holiness it is used in Ac. 21:28 for the profaning of the temple by bringing in the uncircumcised and in Hb. 9:13 for ritually unclean things (cf. 4 Macc. 7:6) which can be made capable of cultic use by lustrations. In both cases the opposite is → ἅγιος.<sup>8</sup>

**make common or impure, defile** in<sup>9</sup> 2. In connection with the N<sup>10</sup>T view of personal holiness it is found in Mt. 15:11, 18, 20 and par<sup>11</sup>., where we read that the capacity for

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<sup>2</sup> William Arndt et al., [\*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature\*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 146.

<sup>3</sup> William Arndt et al., [\*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature\*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 308.

<sup>4</sup>RSV *Revised Standard Version: NT, 1946; OT, 1952; Common Bible, 1973*

<sup>5</sup> B. O. Banwell, “[Mouth.](#)” ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 789.

<sup>6</sup> William Arndt et al., [\*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature\*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 508.

<sup>7</sup>OT Old Testament.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Hauck, “[Κοινός, Κοινωνός, Κοινωνέω, Κοινωνία, Συγκοινωνός, Συγκοινωνέω, Κοινωνικός, Κοινώω.](#)” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 809.

<sup>9</sup> William Arndt et al., [\*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature\*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 552.

<sup>10</sup>NT New Testament.

<sup>11</sup>par. parallel.

fellowship with God is destroyed, not by material uncleanness (foods, hands), but only by personal sin.<sup>12</sup>

## Commentary Studies

**15:15** Having used the approach of the disciples for another purpose (with the insertion of vv. 12–14), Matthew needs a fresh introduction to move the story on. And since he brought Peter to the fore in his story for the first time at 14:28 (see there), he has an opportunity here to carry this thread forward before giving Peter the major role in 16:16–19. So he has Peter ask the question attributed to the disciples together in Mk. 7:17. ἄποκριθεις ... εἶπεν ('[he] answered' earlier, but '[he] responded' here) occurs a third time (cf. Mt. 15:3, 13).<sup>17130</sup> The construction here is not such a close match as the previous two to each other, but it creates the impression of a set of responses to a developing situation. Mark's cryptic 'the parable' as what the disciples asked becomes 'Explain (φράσον) the parable to us', the only NT use of φράζειν. 'To us' marks the involvement of all the disciples despite Matthew's highlighting of Peter. As discussed at 13:3a, to describe something as a parable is to indicate that it is not to be taken literally but needs to be secondarily related to another (or occasionally a wider) sphere of significance.

**15:16** For the substance throughout and exactly for the final four Greek words Matthew follows Mk. 7:18. In Matthew ὁ δὲ εἶπεν always introduces Jesus as the speaker.<sup>17141</sup> Mark's οὕτως ('in this way') becomes ἀκμήν ('still'),<sup>17152</sup> softening the comparison with the Pharisees and scribes and, along with the coming explanation (vv. 17–20), pointing to the temporary nature of the disciples' failure to understand (cf. the movement to full understanding in chap. 13 coming to its goal in v. 51). The use of ἀσύνητος ('without understanding') follows up on the allusion in 15:10 to the motif of understanding and not understanding as explored in chap. 13 and is thus a reminder of the supreme importance of understanding the thrust of Jesus' teaching.

**15:17** While Matthew repeats much of the Markan language, the changes are quite important. The initial key is the loss of 'is not able to defile him [or her] because it does not enter into the heart'. This would be to put the matter too strongly for Matthew. In the lapidary language of the 'parable' Jesus could use for rhetorical effect a contrast pattern of not one thing but the other. But now that he is explaining, such absoluteness must be given up. The quasi-anatomical distinction between heart and stomach remains important as pointing to the priority of the one over the other, but Mark's 'is not able to defile ... because' seems to say too

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<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Hauck, "[Κοινός, Κοινωνός, Κοινωνέω, Κοινωνία, Συγκοινωνός, Συγκοινωνέω, Κοινωνικός, Κοινώω.](#)" ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 809.

<sup>13170</sup> In Mk. 7:17 the disciples 'asked'.

<sup>14171</sup> There are ten uses. Mk. 7:18 has καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς ('and he says to them').

<sup>15172</sup> Only here in the NT.

much. The loss of καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα (lit<sup>16</sup>. ‘cleansing all the foods’) at the end of the verse confirms the drift of Matthew’s thinking here. In line with the changes at v. 11, Mark’s ‘from outside’ goes and ‘into the mouth’ replaces ‘into the person’.<sup>17173</sup> Matthew retrieves the orphaned ‘into the stomach’ (dropping the ‘but’ that preceded it in Mark) and compensates for the loss of a principal verb by adding χωρεῖ (‘makes its way’).<sup>17184</sup> In Matthew’s hands v. 17 is largely a foil for vv. 18–19 to follow: our link with the food we eat does not affect us in a central way (enters the stomach) and does not last (is expelled into the latrine).

**15:18** Mark’s fresh introduction of speech (ἔλεγεν ὅτι) is dropped, and Matthew moves to the plural for τὰ ἐκπορευόμενα (‘the things that go out’) and for the resumptive ἐκεῖνα (‘those’) in anticipation of the list that is coming.<sup>17195</sup> In line with vv. 11 and 17, Matthew has ‘out of the mouth’ for Mark’s ‘out of the person’. As a bridge to v. 19 Matthew adds ἐκ τῆς καρδίας ἐξέρχεται καί (‘come out of the heart and’), creating an extra clause. ἐκπορευόμενα (‘go out’) and ἐξέρχεται (‘come out’) look in opposite directions: things can ‘go out of the mouth’ because they first ‘come out of the heart’ (to the mouth). The juxtaposition of ‘mouth’ and ‘heart’ creates a cross link to 12:34 (‘out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks’). The same close correlation of ‘mouth’ and ‘heart’ is evident in Rom. 10:8–10; 2 Cor. 6:11. The link with the heart is the new thing compared to Mt. 15:11.<sup>17206</sup> Matthew has already multiply signalled the importance of the heart,<sup>17217</sup> most recently in the citation of Is. 29:13 in v. 8. As discussed at 5:8, the ‘heart’ locates the core identity of a person, that place from which one feels and thinks and determines one’s actions. What involves the heart is self-evidently of much greater significance than what involves only the stomach. A discussion of how the defilement is understood to work is reserved for v. 20, after the list of actual offences has been considered.

**15:19** Matthew drops ἔσωθεν (‘from within’) as he has earlier dropped ἔξωθεν (‘from outside’). He does not reproduce Mark’s clear signalling for the use of οἱ διαλογισμοὶ οἱ κακοί (‘evil inclinations’) as an introductory umbrella category. Matthew drops the articles<sup>17228</sup> and

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<sup>16</sup>lit. literally

<sup>17173</sup> A further minor change is that ἐκπορεύεται (‘goes out’) becomes ἐκβάλλεται. The change may be simply to avoid using the same verb as that used to speak about what comes out of the mouth in Mt. 15:18. It may also, however, be in the interests of using a stronger verb to underline the temporary nature of connection with food (ἐκβάλλεται should mean ‘is expelled’, but as with other words using the βαλλ- root, the force could be weakened—NRSV translates ‘goes’, presumably taking the verb as middle rather than passive).

<sup>18174</sup> The use of χωρεῖν in this sense is found only here and in 2 Pet. 3:9 (‘come [to repentance]’). Matthew uses the verb also in 19:11–12, but with a different sense.

<sup>19175</sup> Mark’s plural in 7:15 (reduced to a singular by Matthew in 15:11) may be exerting some influence.

<sup>20176</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:535, aptly cite Philo, *Fuga* 79: ‘The treasures of evil things are in ourselves’.

<sup>21177</sup> Mt. 5:8, 28; 6:21; 9:4; 11:29; 12:34; 13:15, 19; 15:8; yet to come, 18:35; 22:37.

<sup>22178</sup> Cf. Ez. 38:10; 1 Macc. 11:8 (singular in Je. 11:19: λογισμοὺς πονηροὺς [‘evil thoughts’]). But perhaps, despite the plural, Matthew intends something like the ‘evil impulse’ of rabbinic discussion.



moves the verb, so that ‘evil inclinations’ could now be just the first item of a list. Given, however, that the following items are all concrete acts, it is probably best still to treat ‘evil inclinations’ as separate, perhaps ‘evil inclinations [and then out of these] acts of murder ...’.

Taking ‘evil inclinations’ separately, Matthew has rearranged the Markan list as follows. ‘Acts of murder’ is promoted to first place (third in Mark) and ‘acts of adultery’ to second (fourth in Mark), while ‘acts of sexual immorality’ is moved back to third (first in Mark). This gives Matthew the order of the first set of three antitheses in 5:21–32<sup>17239</sup> (which tends to confirm the likelihood that ‘evil inclinations’ is preliminary to the list). Then, ‘acts of theft’ is placed fourth (second in Mark), ‘acts of false witness’ fifth (not in Mark), and ‘acts of slander’<sup>18240</sup> sixth (tenth in Mark, but in the singular). From Mark’s list, ‘acts of avarice’, ‘deceit’, ‘licentiousness’, ‘an evil eye’, ‘pride’, and ‘folly’ are dropped. Matthew sticks with matters which in Jewish terms would not only be immoral but also criminal, and all his items relate to the Ten Commandments. Two—positions two and three—relate to the adultery commandment, and two—positions five and six—relate to the false witness commandment (thus two sets of three). This means that he deals with the four Commandments from murder to false witness in the order of the Ten Commandments (honouring of parents, which comes before murder, has been addressed in vv. 3–6).

In v. 19 Matthew finally gives up on ‘out of the mouth’, which he has intruded into vv. 11, 17, and 18: only two of the six items on the list can readily be viewed as ‘going out of the mouth’. The others are just as much generated from within, but the mouth is not a necessary mediating organ.

**15:20** Matthew drops Mark’s πάντα (‘all’), τὰ πονηρά (‘the evil [things]’), and ἐκπορεύεται (‘going out’) as unnecessary, and ἔσωθεν (‘from within’) as in the previous verse.

So how does this defilement—the defilement that has been set over against possible defilement from food—work? The discussion at 15:11 has shown how using impure language in relation to immorality has a solid foundation in the OT. Despite the emphasis on the contrast between coming out of and going into, here concrete deeds of evil (in the world ‘out there’) are treated as defiling, not the state of the heart as such. Or at least it is the deeds which are *immediately* defiling. Matthew’s first reference to the heart is to those who are ‘pure in heart’ (5:8).

In 15:18 Matthew seems to be following the trail of the transfer of uncleanness from the heart and through the mouth (heading out). This is no doubt meant to be the inverse of the track implicitly identified by the Pharisees and scribes as from the hands (to the food) and through the mouth (heading in). Matthew has now provided an image in which the idea of the heart as being pure or impure is linked with that of becoming impure through immoral deeds: people become impure from their immoral deeds as the impurity of the heart flows out (often

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<sup>23179</sup> We will see below that there are two sets of three, as in Mt. 5:21–48.

<sup>24180</sup> ‘Acts of slander’ translates βλασφημῖαι. The singular has been translated ‘blasphemy’ in Mt. 12:31, and I have uniformly rendered the cognate verb as ‘blaspheme’. I noted at 9:3 the relative looseness of NT usage of language of blasphemy, but in the other reference a connection with God has encouraged me to keep the language of ‘blasphemy’. The plural and the absence of such a link here point to ‘acts of slander’ as the intended meaning.

via the mouth) to produce the deeds. Presumably the unstated assumption here is that one is in impurity-producing contact with one's own deeds.

Over against the trio of hands, food (via the mouth), and the whole person, related to ritual impurity, is set the trio of heart, deeds (often via the mouth), and the whole person, related to moral impurity. Starting from defiled hands, the Pharisees and scribes thought that the last state was worse than the first if food was consumed without washing the hands. Starting from a defiled heart, the Matthean Jesus suggests that the last state is worse than the first if the heart, not first purified, is given free rein (in part through the mouth) to allow evil inclinations to mature into violations of the Ten Commandments.

From this point we can look back to v. 17 and see more clearly that the role of the contrast of stomach and heart is to make the point that what reaches only the stomach cannot affect the purity of the heart, which is a matter of much more profound importance than is the ritual purity of the body.

Now at the very end Matthew creates a direct comment (not in Mark) on the concern of v. 2. He has forcefully set relative priorities between matters relating to ritual purity and matters relating to moral purity. But what does Jesus think of the specific matter raised? Quite apart from whether it was a small or a large matter, a practice in disregard of the highest standards of piety or not, were the disciples becoming ritually unclean when they ate with unwashed hands? The answer is a straightforward 'No'. What the Pharisees and scribes appeal to in v. 2 is implicitly identified in v. 3 as based on tradition and not on the commandment of God. And v. 11 has made clear that, in the desire to push back the boundaries of the realm within which Jewish people typically identified the requirements of their obedience to God, the Pharisees and scribes were moving in the wrong direction. They were developing the wrong kinds of traditions. Without in any way intending to disturb the validity of OT concerns with ritual purity, Jesus judges that eating with unwashed hands does not defile.<sup>25</sup>

**15–16** Peter, doubtless as the spokesmen of the other disciples, asks for an explanation of τὴν παραβολὴν [ταύτην], lit. "[this] parable," i.e., what so upset the Pharisees. The textually uncertain ταύτην, "this," would seem to refer to the analogy just given in v. 14, or possibly v. 13. But the explanation shows clearly that v. 11 is in mind (with Davies-Allison, contra Schweizer). In Mark the request for interpretation of the "parable" comes immediately after the saying about what does and what does not defile (Mark 7:17). παραβολή (*māšāl*; see *Comment* on 13:3) is used here in the broad sense of proverb, riddle, or wisdom saying, suitable to the content of v.

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<sup>25</sup> John Nolland, [\*The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text\*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 625–628.

11. φράσον, “explain,” is used only here in the NT (cf. the different word in 13:36). The response of Jesus involves a mild rebuke of the disciples (unusual in Matthew) contained in καὶ ὑμεῖς, “you yourselves also,” and in ἀκμήν, “even now” (the only NT occurrence of the word). The disciples had already been initiated into the secrets of the kingdom (13:11) expressed through parables and had affirmed that they had understood “all these things” (13:51). Yet despite the fundamental importance of understanding (cf. 13:23), they were unable to understand what Jesus was saying (cf. the same failure in connection with the teaching of the Pharisees in 16:9–12).

**17** What is ingested by humans (τὸ εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς τὸ στόμα, “what goes into the mouth”) passes through “the dietary tract” (τὴν κοιλίαν) and into the “latrine” (ἀφεδρῶνα). Food is accordingly of little consequence to the spiritual state of a person. It would be possible from this verse to conclude that such defilement as may occur in eating certain foods is only temporary, except for the clear statement in v. 11 that what is eaten “does not defile a person.”

**18–19** By direct contrast, “the things that come out of the mouth” (τὰ δὲ ἐκπορευόμενα ἐκ τοῦ στόματος), i.e., the words one speaks, do defile a person (cf. v. 11; cf. Jas 3:1–11). The words come ἐκ τῆς καρδίας, “from the heart,” and thus have to do with the very nature of a person (see 12:34–35). And “from the heart” comes a veritable stream of wickedness. Matthew provides only a representative list of seven items (cf. Mark’s thirteen), with one item, ψευδομαρτυρίαί, “lies,” not from Mark’s list, probably thought by Matthew to be particularly appropriate to things from the heart uttered by the mouth. It also brings to four the number of the second table of the ten commandments that are represented (in addition to murder, adultery, and stealing, which Matthew reorders to agree with the OT order, both in the M<sup>26T</sup> and in the LX<sup>27X</sup>). But if this was a concern of Matthew’s, why did he omit Mark’s “covetousness,” i.e., the tenth commandment?

**20** The thought of v. 18b is now repeated for emphasis. ταῦτα, “those things,” are what truly make a person unclean (cf. τοῦτο, “this” [v. 11]). Matthew’s added final words in v. 20b recall in a somewhat anticlimactic manner the initial accusation of the Pharisees and scribes in v. 2, and at the same time divert the reader’s attention from the possible implications of Jesus’ words for the dietary law itself. Thus in Matthew’s portrayal (in striking contrast to Mark’s), Jesus criticizes only the tradition of the Pharisees and makes no radical reformation of the written Torah itself. What does not defile is eating with unwashed hands. For Matthew, Jesus and Jesus alone is the true interpreter of the law.

### **Explanation**

Above all others the Pharisees were respected and admired for their serious pursuit of righteousness (cf. 23:2–3). Perhaps this is exactly why Jesus criticized them so harshly. The source of their perspective was not God; they were themselves but blind guides of blind disciples. As had been pointed out in the preceding passage, they sadly allowed human teachings to cancel out the very commandments of God. They so valued the items of minor significance and a ritualistic formalism that they neglected emphasizing what truly makes a

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<sup>26</sup>MT The Masoretic Text [of the Old Testament] (as published in BHS)

<sup>27</sup>LXX The Septuagint, Greek translation of the OT

person unclean (cf. 23:23). The passage thus stands as a warning to all those who concern themselves with the intensive pursuit of righteousness and who in so doing elevate human tradition and formalism to a level equal with or even higher than scripture itself. The true problem of sin is not to be found in a failure to perform correctly some external minutiae of human making; sin is an interior matter that concerns the evil thought, words, and deeds that come from the heart. Moral righteousness is thus far more important than ritual purity. The fundamental problem of humanity is more basic than the Pharisees dreamed. The Pharisees simply failed to address sin as a radical human problem. The overcoming of sin, however, was essential to the purpose and work of Jesus (cf. 1:21; 26:28).<sup>28</sup>

**15. ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν αὐτῷ· φράσον ἡμῖν τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην.**<sup>6297</sup> Compare 13:36. This is the third time ἀποκριθεὶς + εἶπεν has been used in this section (cf. vv. 3, 13). In Mark we read that ‘his disciples’ (in the house<sup>6308</sup>) asked Jesus about ‘the parable’. But in Matthew Peter is the sole speaker. For the meaning of ‘parable’ see pp. 378–82. The word is here fitting because Jesus’ declaration is extraordinary speech which is difficult to understand (cf. Boucher (v), p. 66).

Pace Schweizer, *Matthew*, p. 326, Peter’s question harks back to v. 11, not vv. 12–14. Yet the rejection of Pharisaic teaching in vv. 12–14 does help explain why our evangelist has here introduced Peter. As soon as Jesus has discredited the teaching passed on by the guardians of the old tradition, he goes on to transmit teaching to Peter, the guardian of the new tradition. So later, in the post-Easter period, when the rock of the church will declare what to bind and loose (16:19), he will do so on the basis of instruction received from Jesus.

In Acts 10–11; 15 and Gal 2 Peter is involved in debates over the meaning of ritual impurity and its bearing upon the Gentile question. One must wonder whether Matthew’s tradition associated the apostle with this topic and whether this encouraged his being mentioned precisely here. Was Peter remembered by Matthew’s community as having issued teaching on the matter of clean and unclean?

**16. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν.** Compare 14:18, 29; 26:18; Mk 7:18 has: καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς (cf. 26:18 diff. Mk 14:13).

**ἀκμὴν καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀσυνετοὶ ἐστε;** So Mark, with οὕτως instead of ἀκμὴν. This last, a late word, is used nowhere else in the Greek Bible (cf. Heb 5:13 v. 1.). The adverbial accusative is the equivalent of ἔτι: ‘even yet, still’ (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 19:118 and see BDF § 160). ἀσυνετοὶ harks back to v. 10: ‘hear and understand’.

**17.** Jesus asks a second question, this about things entering the mouth. He is here expounding the first part of the saying in v. 11 (on what does not defile). In the next verse (v. 18) he will turn to the second part (on what does defile). ‘The point of the passage is that the belly

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<sup>28</sup> Donald A. Hagner, [Matthew 14–28](#), vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 436–437.

<sup>2967</sup> ταύτην is missing from  $\chi$  B  $f^1$  700 892 so bo and may be secondary.

<sup>3068</sup> Matthew omits the mention of a house on several occasions.

is not the real man, so that food which enters the former cannot affect the latter' (McNeile, p. 228).

**οὕτω νοεῖτε ὅτι πᾶν τὸ εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς τὸ στόμα εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν χωρεῖ καὶ εἰς ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκβάλλεται;**<sup>6319</sup> Compare T. Job 38:5: καταβῆ ... εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα. ἀφεδρῶν (LXX: O) means 'latrine'. Matthew has revised Mk 7:18–19 (' "Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so is evacuated?" Thus he declared all food clean') by shortening it, adding a reference to the mouth (as in v. 11), and excising Mark's concluding editorial comment: the First Evangelist could not abide such a sweeping dismissal of OT law.<sup>7320</sup>

**18.** Having explained what does not defile a man, Jesus now declares what does, affirming that 'the treasures of evil things are in ourselves' (Philo, *Fug.* 79).

**τὰ δὲ ἐκπορευόμενα ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ἐκ τῆς καρδίας ἐξέρχεται, κάκεῖνα κοινοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον.** Compare Rom 10:8 for the close connexion between heart and mouth. Compare also v. 11b; Mk 7:20; Jas 3:6. Matthew has added 'out of the mouth' (cf. vv. 11, 17) and also, in anticipation of v. 19 = Mk 7:21, 'out of the heart'. And Mark's singular ('that going out') has been turned into the plural ('the things which go out'), in view of the following list.

**19.** The evils sown by the heart in the subterranean regions of human nature are now catalogued. They are seven in number (in Mark, thirteen).

Lists of vices are common in the NT.<sup>7331</sup> They are not so characteristic of the OT (although note the Decalogue and Hos 4:2). It is usually thought that lists of virtues and vices, which are common in Hellenistic philosophy (especially Stoicism), entered Christianity via Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>7342</sup> This may well be so, but caution is in order because the lists in 1QS 4 may be free of Greek influence (note also T. Reub. 3:3–6; T. Levi 17:11; As. Mos. 7:3–10); and there are also Iranian parallels. Probably early Christians used virtue and vice lists—largely taken over with little alteration from their environment—in catechetical instruction. But secondary uses are well-attested, such as the description of heretics or pagans.

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<sup>3169</sup> οὐ (so NA<sup>26</sup>) is found in B D Z f<sup>3</sup> 33 565 pc lat sy<sup>s.c.p</sup> sa mae Or; but is this not assimilation to Mark and Mt 16:11? So HG.

<sup>3270</sup> Pace Gundry, *Commentary*, p. 308, who attributes the omission simply to maintenance of antithetical parallelism.—We note the possibility that Mark originally wrote καθαρίζον, not καθαρίζων: 'decontaminating all foods' (meaning excrement is neither clean nor unclean); see Malina (v), pp. 22–5. In this case Mark's text would not clearly dismiss the Mosaic food ordinances.

<sup>3371</sup> Examples include: Mt 15:19 = Mk 7:21–2; Rom 1:29–31; 1 Cor 6:9–10; 2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:19–20; Eph 5:3–5; Col 3:5, 8; 1 Tim 1:9–10; 2 Tim 3:2–5; Tit 3:3; 1 Pet 4:3; Rev 9:20–1; 21:8. Cf. Did. 5:1; 1 Clem. 35:5; Barn 18–20; Hermas, *Mand.* 8:5; Polycarp, *Phil.* 2:2; 4:3; 5:2; 6:1; Teach. Silvanus 84:20–6; 2 En. 10:4–5; 3 Bar. 4:17; 8:5; 13:4. Allen, p. 167, cites an interesting Buddhist parallel (cf. Deissmann, *Light*, p. 315, n. 8).

<sup>3472</sup> Cf. Wisd 14:25–6; Philo, *Sac.* 32; *Rer. div. her.* 173; *Conf. ling.* 117; 4 Macc 1:26–7.

ἐκ γὰρ τῆς καρδίας ἐξέρχονται.<sup>7353</sup> Mk 7:21 opens with the longer ἔσωθεν γὰρ ἐκ τῆς καρδίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

**διαλογισμοὶ πονηροί.** Compare Ezek 38:10 (LXX: λογισμοὺς πονηρούς); Jas 2:4. οἱ διαλογισμοὶ οἱ κακοὶ ἐκπορεύονται appears in Mk 7:21. πονηρός<sup>36\*</sup> is a Matthean favourite, and the omission of the definite articles increases the resemblance with the following items. Although the list opens with ‘evil designs’ (the only double-membered entry) it goes on to cite six concrete actions. Perhaps implicit is the truth that behind every public evil there lurk the sinful, wicked thoughts which are its roots (cf. Gen 6:5). Indeed, maybe διαλογισμοὶ πονηροί is Matthew’s Greek equivalent for the *yēṣer hārā*, the evil impulse, which the rabbis generally located in the heart.<sup>7374</sup>

**φόνοι, μοιχεΐαι, πορνείαι.** Mark has a different order: 2, 3, 1.<sup>7385</sup> φόνος (= ‘murder’) and μοιχεΐα (= ‘adulterous acts’) occur only here in the First Gospel. For the meaning of πορνεία see on 5:32.

**κλοπαί, ψευδομαρτυρίαι, βλασφημίαι.** Only the first and last items are from Mark; the other, which reflects Matthew’s interest in evil speech, is redactional (cf. 26:59–60). Mark has a much longer list here: ‘theft, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, the evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness’. On the meaning of ‘blasphemy’ (it here means more than ‘slander’) see on 12:31.

Matthew’s list has (for mnemonic or catechetical reasons?) been influenced by the second table of the decalogue (as have the lists in 1 Cor 5:9–10; 1 Tim 1:9–10; and Barn 19). After ‘evil devices’, the catalogue refers to murder, adultery, unchastity, theft, bearing false witness, and blasphemy. This resembles the sixth through ninth commandments, which concern murder, adultery, theft, and bearing false witness—commandments which immediately follow the injunction to honour father and mother (cf. Mt 15:4). The differences are two: Matthew has two words for sexual sins (cf. Mk 10:19; 1 Cor 6:9; Heb 13:4; Did. 5:1; Barn 19:4) and two words for sinful speech (cf. the pairs in Rom 13:13). He has, in other words, slightly expanded the inventory while staying close to both the content and order of Exod 20:13–17. Perhaps the evangelist wanted a total of seven entries, seven being the number of completeness.<sup>7396</sup> Or is there some connexion with the fact that most rabbinic authorities came to recognize seven Noachic commandments (four of these being: do not blaspheme, do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not rob; see Davies, *PRJ*, pp. 113–17)? Note also that in Matthew every item ends with -οι or -αι. This feature, which exemplifies the evangelist’s love for parallelism, is absent from Mark.

Matthew’s list of vices is thoroughly conventional. Following the general διαλογισμοὶ πονηροί, all the entries are related to the decalogue, appear often in the OT, and show up in

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<sup>3573</sup> These words and those after ἐξέρχεται in v. 18 are omitted through homoioteleuton in  $\kappa^*$  W bo<sup>ms</sup>.

<sup>36\*</sup> An asterisk (\*) after a Greek word or phrase signifies that that word or phrase is listed in vol. 1 on pp. 75–9 and so is characteristic of the First Evangelist.

<sup>3774</sup> See Davies, *PRJ*, pp. 20–35. Cf. 4 Ezra 3:21.

<sup>3875</sup> So HG, but the text is uncertain and NA<sup>26</sup> prints πορνείαι, κλοπαί, φόνοι, μοιχεΐαι.

<sup>3976</sup> On this see K. H. Rengstorf, *TWNT* 2, pp. 623–31; M. Pope, in *IDB* 4, pp. 294–5.

other early Christian vice lists: φόνος (cf. Rom 1:29; Rev 9:21; 22:15; Did. 5:1; Barn 20:1), μοιχεία (cf. 1 Cor 6:9; Did. 5:1; Barn 19:4), πορνεία (cf. 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3; Col 3:5; Rev 9:21; Did. 5:1; Barn 19:4), κλοπή (cf. 1 Cor 6:10; Rev 9:21; Did. 3:5; 5:1), ψευδομαρτυρία (cf. Did. 5:1; Polycarp, *Phil.* 2:2; 4:3), βλασφημία (cf. Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; 1 Tim 6:4). Next to Mk 7:21–2, the list most closely related to Mt 15:19 is, to our knowledge, Did. 5:1. It contains five of the vices cited in Matthew—in precisely the same form and order: φόνοι, μοιχεῖαι ... πορνεῖαι, κλοπαί ... ψευδομαρτυρία. Is this a coincidence, evidence of a shared tradition, or a sign of literary dependence?

**20. ταῦτά ἐστιν τὰ κοινοῦντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον.** Cf. v. 18b and Mk 7:23: ‘All these things come from within and they defile a man’.

**τὸ δὲ ἀνίπτοις χερσὶν φαγεῖν οὐ κοινοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον.** This, which refers back to v. 2 (τό is anaphoric: BDF § 399), is redactional. Note the parallelism with the previous clause.

Matthew’s closing words have the effect of making the whole discussion turn around the question of the Pharisaic tradition rather than the written law, for the washing of hands before meals was not enjoined in the latter, only the former.

#### (iv) *Concluding Observations*

(1) Matthew believed that the law and the prophets were still valid (5:17–20). He also believed that the Gentiles had come to a full share in God’s salvation (28:16–20). In holding together these two beliefs the evangelist exhibited the qualities which Edmund Burke considered characteristic of the sound statesman: the disposition to preserve and the ability to reform (cf. 13:52). There was preservation because, despite acceptance of the Gentile influx, the Jewish Torah was not abandoned (cf. 15:4–9). There was reformation because, in the light of the Messiah’s teaching, Jewish tradition had to be critically evaluated and in some measure rejected.

We unfortunately do not know very much about the everyday, concrete realities of Matthew’s community. For example, how did law-observant Jews relate to uncircumcised Gentiles? We can only guess. Perhaps, however, we can make a good guess. Notwithstanding the fact that many—not all—pious, non-Christian Jews refused to eat with Gentiles,<sup>7407</sup> we detect in our Gospel no evidence of segregated groups. This makes the existence of separate fellowships (cf. Gal 2) improbable. On the other hand, that there was a total disregard of traditional law, so that Jewish Christians had no scruples at all concerning what they ate, is most unlikely.<sup>7418</sup> Unlikelier still is a scenario in which Gentile Christians observed all the laws of Judaism (Matthew nowhere mentions circumcision). We are left, then, with the likelihood that Gentile believers kept a minimum number of OT commandments, sufficient to allow fellowship with Jews. Such *may* have been the situation in Antioch before the crucial debate between

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<sup>4077</sup> See the texts cited in n. 44.

<sup>4178</sup> Matthew’s omission of Lk 10:8 (‘eat whatever is set before you’) says much; see p. 174.—The social consequences of giving up all the law would, among other things, have borne heavily upon them. See A. E. Harvey, ‘Forty Strokes Save One: Social Aspects of Judaizing and Apostasy’, in Harvey, *Approaches*, pp. 79–96.

Peter and Paul.<sup>7429</sup> More importantly, one is put in mind of the so-called ‘Apostolic Decree’ (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; cf. Rev 2:15, 20). This decree, which, according to the best mss., prohibited four things—eating meat sacrificed to idols, eating blood, eating strangled animals, and intercourse with near kin—recalls the Holiness Code of Lev 17–18, which lays down rules not only for Israelites but also for the ‘strangers that sojourn among them’ (Lev 17:8).<sup>8430</sup> The decree was clearly designed to allow Gentiles and law-abiding Jews to share a common religious life. Whether or not Matthew’s community knew and observed the ‘Apostolic Decree’ we do not know, although we incline to think so.<sup>8441</sup> The First Gospel was probably composed in Antioch, and Acts has the decree being taken there (Acts 15:23, 30). Yet even if the decree was not followed by Matthew’s church, a similar rule of compromise probably was.<sup>8452</sup>

(2) The insertion of 15:12–14 (on the Pharisees as blind leaders) is a clue to Matthew’s historical context. Why were these verses added if the Pharisees or their spiritual descendants were not participants with the evangelist in a real and urgent *Auseinandersetzung*? Why the mention of the Pharisees being offended? Why the command to separate from them? Why the remarks on their failings as leaders? Surely 15:12–14, like chapter 23, manifests Matthew’s concern with the emergent rabbinism of his day. For him the question of the authority of late first-century rabbis was no dead issue. This can only mean that he knew of Christians whose loyalties were not wholly unambiguous, and that he felt bound to direct them away from the Jewish synagogues.

(3) ‘What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that defiles a man’ (15:18). This line reminds one of so much in the SM, which refers several times to the καρδιά and demands that it be pure and focused in intent. This stress on the heart, on the interior life of religion, on intention and attitude, is indeed found throughout Matthew and is a chief characteristic of the whole of his Gospel. The evangelist must have believed that typical of Jesus’ moral teaching and at its centre was the demand for integrity, for harmony between thought and act. In this he was, we think, correct. This is not to say that here we have something unique. The Psalms, the prophets, and the rabbis all attest the necessity of cleansing the heart and purifying interior disposition. In the First Gospel, however, there is a regular and emphatic dwelling on the theme, so that Matthew remains a constant reminder that Jesus ‘laid

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<sup>4279</sup> So J. D. G. Dunn, ‘The Incident at Antioch (Gal 2:11–18)’, *JSNT* 18 (1983), pp. 3–57.

<sup>4380</sup> Was the decree a version of the Noachian commandments (see p. 536), perhaps abbreviated or in the form current in the first century?

<sup>4481</sup> The decree was observed elsewhere, including the circles in which Revelation (cf. 2:15, 20) and the Preaching of Peter (a source of the Pseudo-Clementines) were composed; see E. Molland, ‘La circoncision, le baptême et l’authorite du décret apostolique (Actes 15:28sq.) dans les milieux judéo-chrétiens des Pseudo-Clémentines’, *ST* 9 (1955), pp. 1–39.

<sup>4582</sup> Whether this puts Paul at odds with Matthew depends largely on whether one thinks the apostle accepted or could have accepted the Apostolic Decree. For different opinions see Davies, *PRJ*, pp. 117–9; R. N. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty*, New York, 1964, pp. 254–60; D. R. Catchpole, ‘Paul, James and the Apostolic Decree’, *NTS* 23 (1977), pp. 428–44.



an extraordinary emphasis on the real inner religious significance of the commandments' (Vermes, *World*, p. 47).<sup>46</sup>

(<sup>47</sup>**M**) 15. *And Peter answered and said to Him, Declare to us the parable.*] Mk. has: "And when He entered into a house from the crowd His disciples were asking Him the parable." For Mt.'s omission of Mk.'s vague and indeterminate reference to a house, cf. Mk 2:1, 3:20, 9:28, 10:10 with the parallels in Mt 9:1, 12:22, 15:21, 17:19, 19:8. For the prominence given to S. Peter in this Gospel, cf. 10:2, 14:28ff., 16:16ff.—τὴν παραβολήν] That is the saying of v. 11, which Mt. has already interpreted by inserting ἐκ τοῦ στόματος.

(<sup>48</sup>**M**) 16. *And He said, Are you even yet without understanding?* Mk. has: "And, He saith to them, Are you also so without understanding?"—ὁ δέ] for Mk.'s καί, as often.—εἶπεν] for Mk.'s λέγει, as often.—ἀκμήν] only here in N.T. Mk. has οὔτως.

(<sup>49</sup>**M**) 17. *Do you not understand that everything that goeth into the mouth passeth into the belly, and is cast out into the closet.*] Mk. has: "Do you not understand that everything that goeth into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it goeth not into the heart, but into the belly, and goeth forth into the closet, cleansing all meats." The editor omits the last clause in Mk., which is difficult to construe, and of doubtful meaning.—ἀφεδρών] is a rare word of doubtful meaning. It is generally understood as equivalent to ἀπόπατος. But Wellhausen argues that it means the "intestine," on the ground that this suits the context in Mk. "The intestine (not the closet) cleanses meats by separating from them the unwholesome elements." But Mt., who substitutes ἐκβάλλεται for ἐκπορεύεται and omits καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα, probably understood the word to mean "closet."

(<sup>50</sup>**M**) 18. *But the things which go out from the mouth go forth from the heart, and they defile the man.* ] Mk. has: "And He was saying that that which goes forth from the man, that defiles the man." Mt. again anticipates the explanation. Mk v. 20 simply repeats the ambiguous saying of v. 15b, and the explanation follows in v. 21. But Mt., by substituting ἐκ τοῦ στόματος

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<sup>46</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., [A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew](#), vol. 2, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 534–539.

<sup>47</sup>**M** the Second Gospel.

<sup>48</sup>**M** the Second Gospel.

<sup>49</sup>**M** the Second Gospel.

<sup>50</sup>**M** the Second Gospel.

for ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, and by inserting ἐκ τῆς καρδίας ἐξέρχεται, anticipates the explanation of the next verse.

<sup>(51M)</sup> **19.** *For out of the heart go forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witnesses, railings.*] Mk. has: “For from within from the heart of men evil (κακοί) thoughts go out, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, covetousnesses, maliciousnesses, craft, wantonness, an evil eye, railing, pride, folly.” Mt. in abbreviating Mk.’s list of evils confines it to external actions.

<sup>(52M)</sup> **20.** *These are the things that defile the man. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.*] Mk. has: “All these evil things go out from within and defile the man.”<sup>531</sup>

Cf. *Buddhist and Christian Gospels*, p. 93: “Destroying life, killing, cutting, binding, stealing, speaking lies, fraud and deceptions, worthless reading, intercourse with another’s wife—this is defilement, but not the eating of flesh.”<sup>54</sup>

**15:15** As in 13:36 the disciples ask Jesus for an explanation concerning the “parable,” which will here refer to the short metaphor of v. 11. In Mark the whole group asks the question (Mark 7:17); in Matthew, Peter is their spokesman. This is the second of the five unparalleled references to Peter in Matthew 14–18 (see under 14:28–31), and it casts Peter in an entirely negative light, even if the plural “you” of vv. 16–17 shows that all the disciples were similarly befuddled. Peter’s question demonstrates again that cognitive understanding of Jesus’ metaphors is not all that is at stake. Even the Pharisees understood Jesus’ words enough to be put off (v. 12). The question also further blurs the line of distinction between the disciples and the crowds. One can hardly speak of the crowds clearly rejecting Jesus and the disciples clearly accepting him even at this advanced stage in his ministry. The disciples’ obtuseness is heightened because, given the nature of Jesus’ reply, they apparently do not pick up even on all of the cognitive level of meaning. Or, perhaps more likely, they do understand Jesus’ point but recognize that its implications are so radical that they want to make sure of what Jesus has in mind. This would fit the pattern of chap. 13, where that which is most offensive in the parables ultimately involves claims about Jesus and their implications for discipleship.

**15:16–20** In v. 16 Jesus rebukes the disciples for their *lack of understanding* (“so dull”). On understanding cf. under 13:13–15, 51 and 15:10. In light of v. 15, it is hard to see how Matthew can be viewed as significantly improving Mark’s picture of the disciples. Verses 17–20 clarify and

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<sup>51</sup>M the Second Gospel.

<sup>52</sup>M the Second Gospel.

<sup>531</sup> The addition of the last clause in Mt. is significant. In Mk. the section vv. 14–23 might seem to be directed against the Mosaic regulations with regard to clean and unclean meats. Mt., by omitting Mk 19 end and by inserting the last clause, seems to have wished to make it clear that the whole paragraph was directed not against the Mosaic law, but against the ceremonial rules of the Pharisees.

<sup>54</sup> Willoughby C. Allen, [\*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew\*](#), International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1907), 166–167.

illustrate the distinction between ceremonial and moral cleanness. Ritually impure food harms no one. What the body doesn't use is eliminated through the digestive tract (v. 17).<sup>7554</sup> Jesus is obviously not talking about ingesting that which does bodily damage, such as the abuse of alcohol or drugs. Morally impure behavior and speech, however, always harms oneself and others and remains an offense to God (v. 18). Jesus' illustrations combine in sequence the Sixth through the Ninth Commandments of the Decalogue (Exod 20:13–16). These are introduced by general sins of the thought life and supplemented by the sins of sexual immorality (*porneia*), naturally associated with adultery, and of *blasphemies* (a better rendering of Greek *blasphemiai* than "slander"), naturally linked with false testimony (v. 19). Verse 20b brings the discussion back full circle to the original charge of v. 2 and makes it plain that God's people no longer need to observe ritual hand washing.

Christians today ought to ponder long on the implications of vv. 17–20. Many churchgoers continue to attend services and activities faithfully, even while indulging, without repentance, in sexual sin on the side, or even while mistreating fellow Christians with unkind or abusive speech.<sup>7565</sup> Such people remain defiled in God's eyes rather than those who violate rules of human origin about how Christians should act. Sadly, the latter are often precisely those who are condemned by their more legalistic brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>7576</sup> Like the Pharisees, the defenders of those rules seem always able to find some Scripture they can twist to offer support for their traditions.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>5574</sup> The NIV "goes ... out of the body" is a euphemistic translation of the Greek εἰς ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκβάλλεται," which might be rendered, more literally, *is cast into the toilet*, which was probably a disposal bucket emptied onto a dungheap.

<sup>5675</sup> Cf. A. Plummer (*An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew* [London: E. Stock, 1909], 212): "Rigid scrupulosity about things of little moment may be accompanied with utterly unscrupulous conduct in matters that are vital."

<sup>5776</sup> Bruner (*Churchbook*, 541) likens Jesus' action to a very conservative Christian leader today who would choose to allow his followers to dance or drink.

<sup>58</sup> Craig Blomberg, [Matthew](#), vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 241–242.