

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Anthony Brett

Facing the challenge of the world today: How to clean up our lives

I was helping my aunt with the washing up in the kitchen when she said to me that a certain plate was “too dirty to wash”. It’s an expression that has stayed with me! I now know what she meant. I should have rinsed the worst off first but, at the time, I was puzzled. Could anything be too dirty to wash?

The title of today’s talk is “How to clean up our lives” and I would like to read with you a few verses in Psalm 119. Psalm 119:1 reads, “Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD!” and then in verses 9-11 the Psalmist asks the question, “How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You” Psalm 119:9-11.

I suppose that there are degrees of cleanliness. A farmer might consider a feeding trough clean enough for his cattle, but wouldn’t sit and eat his own lunch from it. A factory might have what was considered a clean workshop but a theatre sister in a hospital would never allow an operation to be performed there. My mum and dad used to have an old man round for dinner once a week who could never be prevailed upon to wash his mud-encrusted hands before he ate. In his words it was clean dirt! Is it possible for any one of us to clean up our own lives so that we are acceptably clean before God? Job in the Old Testament phrased it, “How can a man be just before God?” Job 9:2. The very clear answer to this question from Scripture is that it is just not possible for any one of us to do this ourselves.

We need to understand that we are not talking about physical dirt and uncleanness. There was a group of religious fanatics in the Bible, the Pharisees, who were paranoid about maintaining physical cleanliness and would go to extreme lengths, not only to be clean but to make sure everyone around them knew that they were clean! Jesus said about them, “Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.” Matthew 15:17-20.

I am sure that a lot of us will have heard the expression “Cleanliness is next to godliness” but it is nonsense! To wash our hands before we eat and to observe good food hygiene is commendable and sensible but God is far, far more concerned about sin which defiles and dirties us and separates us from Himself. Sin is a word not heard very often today, but it is the one thing that should concern us above everything else. Years before Macbeth’s wife would agonise over her inability to wash away the stain of Duncan’s blood from her hands after she had goaded her husband to murder the king, Job said, “If I wash myself with snow water, and cleanse my hands with soap, yet You will plunge me into the pit, and my own clothes will abhor me.” Job 9:30-31. The stain of sin is impossible for us to remove ourselves, but what we find to be impossible for us, can be remedied by God. “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool”. Isaiah 1:18. My aunt might reckon a plate was too dirty to wash but God does not consider any individual beyond redemption! Even if in Isaiah 1:18 which we have just read together our sins might stand out bright scarlet on a white sheet, God has provided, at great cost to Himself, a remedy. His own Son Jesus died and shed His precious blood to wash us clean as we read in Revelation, “To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood”. Revelation 1:5.

I think, however, that the idea behind the title of today’s talk, “How to clean up our lives”, has more to do with how we, as Christians, can remain clean and useful in a very impure world. When the Lord Jesus first attempted to perform the act of a very lowly servant by washing the feet of His followers, Peter remonstrated with Him and said that the Lord would never wash his feet. After the Lord Jesus had explained to him the necessity of the act Peter wanted to be washed all over. Jesus said to him “He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean.” John 13:10.

Through the blood of Jesus, we can have our sins washed away forever and stand in God’s sight as completely clean and be clothed in the righteousness of His dear Son. But we live in a dirty world, and just in the same way as we get dirty feet if we walk barefoot in the mud or dust, so we will be defiled as we walked through this world. We can’t help it, it will happen! So we need to have our feet washed in a spiritual sense! I am not thinking here about sinful acts, but

rather acknowledging the fact that there is defilement all around us. It's in the newspapers, on the radio or television and on the advertising hoardings. We can hear it in the language of those we work with and even from the children in the school playground.

We don't set out to get dirty, but we can't avoid hearing and seeing things that make us feel dirty and need to be washed away. This is what the Word of God can do for us. It can wash away these defiling thoughts and sights. Paul, in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, writes about the fact that "Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it" (Ephesians 5:25) and then adds, "That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." Ephesians 5:26. Jesus died and shed His blood to purchase and cleanse us from our sins, and He then uses the Word of God to keep us clean and set apart for Himself.

This is a principle that is reinforced in the Old Testament. If you had been able to enter the Tabernacle that Moses had built according to God's precise instructions, you would have first come to the Brazen or Bronze Altar and then to the Bronze Laver or Basin. The Bronze Altar was where the animal sacrifices were burnt; they had to die so that the people might live. Then you moved on to the Bronze Laver where the dust and dirt of the desert could be removed. Scripture is amazingly consistent! First, a blood sacrifice and then washing by water. It is impossible to reverse this order or to miss out the first step.

So how does the Word of God keep us clean? The answer would seem to be contained in the verses we read together from Psalm 119. The Psalmist asks the question, "How can a young man cleanse his way?" and then supplies the answer, "By taking heed thereto according to Your word." (Psalm 119:9) There is both a positive and a negative aspect to this. On the one hand, we are told very clearly what is right and what is wrong. What is right should be embraced and followed and what is wrong should be shunned and avoided at all cost. I need to distinguish between deliberate sin and incidental defilement - between what the Bible teaches is clearly wrong and sinful and the dirt and dust we pick up, often unconsciously, as we walk in a dirty world.

If you look in the kitchen of a café or restaurant, you would expect to see that the staff all hold food hygiene certificates, otherwise the establishment is probably best avoided! As always, the Word of God is ahead of the times and contains a spiritual "food safety certificate" written hundreds of years ago, but still absolutely valid today.

Let's read together from Philippians. "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you". Philippians 4:8-9.

These verses are quite a challenge and they set a very high standard! How our reading and viewing would be transformed if these criteria were consistently applied before we read a book or newspaper, watched the television or listened to the radio. Let's be honest with ourselves. There is not that much today in the secular realm that complies with these standards. Our minds and lives would be much cleaner if we followed Paul's advice in these verses and, as an added bonus, we are told that the "God of peace" (Philippians 4:9) would be our constant companion! We would avoid much of the defilement of this world and what we unavoidably contacted would be washed away as we immersed ourselves in the Word of God.

But what about the defilement, the uncleanness of deliberate sin? Occupation with God's Word will preserve us from so much, but what if we are tempted and sin? Doing something that we know is clearly contrary to God's mind? Are we a lost cause? Useless, worthless and forever after barred from God's service, or can we be washed and recovered? John deals with this aspect in the first chapter of his first letter. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us." 1 John 1:8-10. The sad reality is that whilst we have been saved from the penalty of our sins, we still possess a sinful nature. John in 1 John acknowledges that we will still sin, but also points us to the remedy.

First, we must sincerely confess and repent of the sin and then we learn the wonderful truth that "the blood of Jesus Christ [God's Son] cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7) The blood of Jesus Christ has this wonderful and abiding quality, it cleanses us from all sin! This is not an excuse to sin! Paul writes, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" Romans 6:1. He then supplies the answer: "Far be the thought! How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" Romans 6:2.

The true Christian, unlike a person who does not believe God's good news of salvation, has a new God given nature that hates sin. Our old nature which everyone possesses is sinful and happy to sin. So there is this constant internal conflict and tension between two opposing natures. There is much debate today about "nature" and "nurture" what is the stronger, the more influential in a person's development? As Christians we need to ask a different question however: What nature are we nurturing? In the decisions we make each and every day, we feed and strengthen either

our evil nature or our new, God given nature. Paul says we must treat the old nature, the old selfish me as dead and no longer pander to its desires and longings. Rather, we should occupy ourselves with what will feed and strengthen our new nature. How do we do this? I quote again the verses in Philippians: "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." (Philippians 4:8-9) Or as David wrote in Psalm 119 that we read at the beginning, "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" Psalm 119:11.

There are two other aspects to Christian cleanliness or sanctification that I want to think about. Nehemiah was a cup-bearer in the court of the Persian King Artaxerxes.(Nehemiah 1:11) He was very concerned about the dreadful state of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4) and, with the king's blessing, was allowed to return to his home country to see for himself what could be done. (Nehemiah 1:8) After a thorough initial inspection, Nehemiah persuaded the other residents of Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls. (Nehemiah 2:18) The work started well and with great enthusiasm but a point was reached when one of the leaders came to Nehemiah and said, "The strength of the labourers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall." Nehemiah 4:10.

My desk at work is often cluttered! It's not rubbish, but it does sometimes slow me down. However, we can allow rubbish into our lives to such an extent that it not only slows us down but completely discourages us and stops us. This is the problem Nehemiah faced. So much rubbish had been allowed to accumulate over the years around Jerusalem that the builders were distracted and could no longer build. It was time for a good clean-up!

In Hebrews 12 there is a similar problem. The writer pictures the Christian as running a marathon and encourages us to "lay aside every weight" so that we can "run with endurance the race that is set before us." Hebrews 12:1. Cleaning up our lives involves more than removing and avoiding what is unclean and sinful. We have to clear out the rubbish in our lives and remove the weights. Rubbish would seem to represent that which has no intrinsic value and weights that which has value but is sacrificed so that the work or race can proceed at a faster pace.

Are we prepared to clean up our lives in this way? Having been washed clean by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus from the penalty our sins demanded, we should then strive to keep ourselves pure and clean.

- We must stay as far away from temptation as possible. Satan knows very well what will tempt me and what will tempt you.
- We must each guard our thoughts. "Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust has conceived, it brings forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, brings forth death." James 1:14-15.
- Then we must be prepared to clean out the rubbish from our lives, activities that have no spiritual value, that just hinder our progress and thirdly, we may need to sacrificially lay aside legitimate activities that slow us down.

I said earlier that there were two other aspects or cleaning agents that I wanted to think about. The second one is the return of the Lord Jesus. If we return to John's first Epistle and chapter 3 we read "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is. And every man that hath this hope in Him purifies himself, even as He [Christ] is pure". 1 John 3:2-3. John had commenced the chapter marvelling at the character of the love which our Father God has for each of us. We are His children, but at the moment it isn't apparent to its full extent. But soon, when we see the Lord Jesus face to face, we will be like Him! John says that having this hope within us should have a purifying effect on our lives.

Does it? Do we really believe that Jesus Christ will return and claim us for Himself at any moment? The Lord Jesus told the story of a servant who had been placed in charge of his master's house while his master was absent. (Matthew 25:45-51) How the servant behaved was dependent on whether or not the servant believed his master's return was imminent or not. If he felt his master's return was to be delayed, there was the risk that he would grow lazy and careless. However, if the servant believed that his master could return without warning at any moment, he would be diligent and careful in his dealings. Exactly the same principle applies to us.

We all run the risk of settling down in the world, lowering our standards and getting more and more tangled up. Or we can keep before us the truth of the Lord's return and it will affect the way we live and the plans we make. It will also serve to purify our lives as we are concerned to be watching and waiting, ready for our Saviour's return.

So why should we be concerned to clean up our lives? First and foremost it will be because it will please our God and Father. If we love somebody, we naturally want to please them and when we know clearly that God is holy and pure, we should desire to display those same characteristics ourselves. We have already remembered the verse at the beginning of Hebrews 12: "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay

aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith." (Hebrews 12:1-2). The writer exhorts us to clean up our lives by "laying aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us" but he also draws our attention to our Saviour: "Looking unto Jesus" - the only Man to live a perfectly clean and pure life for the pleasure of God, His Father.

It is also very important to be clean if we have a desire to be of use to God in His work here. Paul writing to his young friend Timothy tells of a great house: "But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honour and some for dishonour. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honour, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work." 2 Timothy 2:20-21. It has been well said that God doesn't use dirty tools. In the book of Isaiah we read similar words: "Touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her, be clean, you who bear the vessels of the LORD." Isaiah 52:11. But when those dirty tools submit to His cleansing, then He can use them!

Each generation faces its own particular challenges, and I suppose that we each think the challenges we face are the worst. Certainly in this country, as in many Western civilisations, we face the problem of constantly lowered moral standards. Years ago we heard the phrase "permissive society," but we have moved so far beyond that point today that it defies belief. As Christians we must guard against uncleanness; we must guard our families against it and, when opportunity arises, we would do well to voice our concerns. Is it an impossible task? It might seem so, and certainly if we expect to see the society around us clean up its act, we will be sorely disappointed. But in our own lives we have a responsibility to be clean and we have the God-given resources to be clean!

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