

Is Hand Washing Commanded? Yes... and No. Matthew 15 and Mark 7 In Context.



There is a lot of misinformation circulating about the ritual handwashing debated in the time the Gospels were written, and so let's make the waters a bit clearer. For now we will just cover the actual hand-washing prayers because sometimes people get upset about them. In the future, we will cover the general first-century belief that not ritually washing the hands would defile food. I have to lay a groundwork in Temple purity before I even go there or it will not be understandable. There is a big difference between holy and common, and clean and unclean. We have to understand them all to understand what was going on here – otherwise we end up thinking that Messiah overturned the Laws of Moses and rebelled against God! There is so much more to these passages than meets the eye.

(EDIT #2 – this is a many part teaching designed for beginners. I have to teach things layer by layer. I am getting a lot of comments about “what I don't seem to understand” that are going unpublished because a lot of those comments don't reflect accurate information and sometimes steer people towards teachers who are a big part of the misunderstandings over this issue. In this teaching I ONLY covered the charge that the prayer itself is somehow sinful or adding to the Torah. I still need to talk about clean/unclean, holy/common before even get to first century ideas about ritual purity. I am not willing to publish comments that want to jump the gun without providing foundational background. I realize that this is unusual, but it is how I teach beginners – I am not

teaching to impress people or to just spew information for people to accept. A lot of the comments I am getting would take another five blogs to deal with some of the problems. So, realize this is a place for beginners to learn, and I am starting off small and working my way to larger issues – but I am not going to just regurgitate information and expect people to accept it without actually teaching them why certain things are and are not true.)

I am sure you've all heard of the Pharisees, right? But what you probably don't know is their history and how few there actually were in the first century – somewhere between five and six thousand. The Pharisees, or P'rushim (from the Hebrew meaning "to separate") came to prominence, and often ruin, during the times of the Hasmoneans after the death of the last of the leaders of the Maccabean Revolt, Simon. During the reign of his grandson Aristobulus I (the first Hasmonean to describe himself as an actual king), some very bitter and deadly disputes rose up between the Pharisees, who believed in using the entire Hebrew Scriptures (like all Jews today), and the Sadducees, who believed in only the bare minimum of Torah (the first five books of Moses) – and what they did believe was very much twisted by their belief that there was no resurrection, nor final judgement, and so blessings had to be taken in this life. Note that when the Scriptures say "chief priests" or "High Priest" they are talking about the Sadducees, who were then buying the High Priesthood yearly from Rome. Although the Sadducees made up the chief priests and high priesthood, they were not the rank and file priests – like Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. As the Sadducees only accepted the first five books of Moses and had zero fear of judgment, it made them very dangerous and they were actually the party responsible for turning Yeshua/Jesus over to Rome to be executed as a political rebel against the Empire. The Pharisees, on the other hand, actually once warned Him away from a plot by Herod Antipas to kill Him (Luke 13.31).

The Pharisees, like most folks, were a mixed bag who were really hamstrung by living in a hyper-honor/shame culture. They were raised in a society where they had to compete for a perceived limited amount of honor (reputation) on behalf of their families. As Yeshua's star rose, theirs fell and some responded by attacking Him, while others responded by following Him (Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and later, in the book of Acts, many others as we see in Acts 15). Paul and Gamaliel, who spared the apostles, were both Pharisees (Paul never renounced his Pharisee status as per Acts 23.6).

So besides the resurrection, what else did the Pharisees believe? Well, as with other Jewish groups during this time period, they believed that they were a living Temple. Yes, that isn't a Christian concept. The Second Temple stood and the Jews believed that they were the living stones that made up a spiritual Temple – they embraced both the physical and spiritual realities. *BECAUSE* they believed that the people of God were collectively His Temple, they had some interesting views on having a relationship with God outside of the Jerusalem Temple – again, not really different than Christians. Most notably, because they saw themselves as a kingdom of priests (again, not a Christian concept), they believed in bringing some Temple purity standards into the home and most importantly, to the dinner table. The table was seen as the altar of the home, where covenant meals could be shared between themselves and God.

So what does this have to do with the prayers that Jews pray even today?

“Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us through your commandments and has commanded us concerning the washing of hands.” (and there is a similar one spoken at the lighting of the Sabbath candles)

Wait, there is no commandment for that, is there? Yes... and no. The Pharisees, and to a large extent, other Jews of the time,

considered themselves part of the living Temple, their table an altar, and each Israelite a priest of God's Kingdom. Are you beginning to see where I am headed? Although they knew they were not and could not be Temple priests, they saw themselves as mediators and servants of God in the world, which are priestly functions. They began looking at the Temple commands for priests and bringing them into their daily lives. Was there a commandment regarding the washing of the hands and lighting of the lamps in the Temple? Absolutely. What we moderns get hung up on is the word "us" in those prayers. As part of a dyadic social group, they were not individualistic. When the priests in the Temple kept a commandment, they were all keeping it by extension. If a priest broke a commandment, they were all breaking it – the Nation was not so much a collection of individuals, but a single people. This is where the Jews and ancient Christians fundamentally differ from us. A commandment for one was considered to apply to all, even if a particular person could not physically perform it themselves. Did Messiah keep every single law? Only if we consider Him to be as one with the nation. He obviously could not physically keep the laws for women, or kings, or those for priests. But as each member of the nation kept the laws, they were collectively considered to be in good standing with God.

Ex 30 ¹⁷ The Lord said to Moses, ¹⁸ "You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, ¹⁹ with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet. ²⁰ When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the Lord, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. ²¹ They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations."

As the altar was a place of food offering for the Lord, the priests were required to wash hands and feet before even approaching it. So, the Pharisees honored God in their homes by reenacting this – were they wrong to call it a commandment? Nope. However, we see that Yeshua did not do this Himself – but He doesn't criticise them for doing it either. Instead, He deftly changes the subject to how they ought to be cleansing themselves on the inside, as was commanded at Sinai, in the circumcision of their hearts. Ritual purity was nothing unless it was accompanied by the inner transformation that we should experience as God's people.

What about the lighting of the Sabbath candles? I won't do an extensive cut and paste here, but the priests were commanded to care for and light the Menorah in the Temple, as well as the fire on the altar. So was the lighting of the Sabbath flame (in those days an oil lamp) commanded? Yes, in a way. Remember, they are bringing the Temple into the home, as living stones.

Let's look at the prayer again:

“Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us through your commandments and has commanded us concerning the washing of hands.”

Nowhere does it say that God commanded us regarding the washing of hands in the home – and so this prayer is not a lie. God really did command us, as His Nation, concerning the washing of hands!

My reason for addressing this is neither to promote nor decry the prayers or the traditions, merely to explain the underlying thought. I honestly don't approve or disapprove, I am ambivalent. If you do it, I don't care. If you refrain – you get the picture, I don't care. Much gets obscured when folks have a definite stand on the issue – sometimes they feel the need to make intentions sinister or to overly excuse what

was going on. I don't participate in the hand washing or much other halakah, but it is very important to me to address the misinformation and knee-jerk negative reactions regarding this tradition. Sometimes we get pushed into judging something before we really understand why it was done, and when we are judging first-century biblical writings, it is incredibly important that we get things right. Yeshua didn't do it, but He didn't condemn anyone for doing it either. There are wars to be fought, and stands to be taken, but only a fool fights every tumbleweed that crosses his path just because it *seems* a bit foreign and sketchy. Let's be wise and discerning before we plunge into battle with one another over things that Messiah Himself let go unchallenged.

Now, as for the belief that the actual eating with unwashed hands caused the food to become defiled – that's another matter entirely. We will cover that in the future.

EDIT: I have been asked about this several times and so I will add a bit more. "We only know that Yeshua's disciples didn't wash their hands, not that He didn't." So to clarify this, we have to look at the Sage/disciple relationship (it is actually anachronistic to call the religious teachers of the day Rabbis – that will come later). Teachers took mainly young teenage boys as their disciples, and I imagine that all these young men were actually quite young, except for Peter (although I am 48 now so in my estimation, Peter probably counts as "very young" as well). The goal of a disciple was to learn everything their teacher knew, and to emulate him in every day. So really, when he was challenged as to the behavior of the disciples, the charge was more likely, "Why are you corrupting the youth?" – a far worse charge than simply personally transgressing their tradition. That being said, the Galillean Jews were very observant of the Traditions of the Elders, far more so than in Judea – and so I imagine he grew up doing this at home. I believe he stopped as an adult because of the need to address the faulty assumption that

clean food could become defiled outside the Temple simply because of having unwashed hands – when we get to the next part, we will address that because Yeshua specifically talks about the inability to defile clean foods with unwashed hands.