

Oh, Make Me Clean

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of cleansing from defilement, which affects not only our guilt but also our intimacy with God, and provides a threefold provision for cleansing: the cleansing word, the cleansing blood, and the cleansing spirit.

Duration: 30:55

Topics: "Purity"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the lack of authenticity in prayer and the reading of the Word of God. He emphasizes that sin can defile a person's spirit and mind, leading to a sense of guilt and the need for more than just forgiveness. The preacher references the book of Job, where Job questions if a clean thing can come from an unclean one, highlighting his awareness of his own defilement. However, the preacher also mentions the prophet Zechariah, who saw a vision of a fountain that could cleanse both sin and uncleanness. The sermon concludes by urging listeners to cleanse their hands and hearts, recognizing the need for purification on both the physical and spiritual planes. The preacher references James 4:8 as support for this idea.

Transcript

Well now, the words of my text this afternoon you will find in the book of Job, and I shall read the fourth verse in the 14th chapter, where we have the aged saint asking a very relevant and a very important question. Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? And then he gives us the answer. The answer he gives is this, there is not one.

Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Job had become acutely aware of the fact that he was not only guilty of certain wrongs in the presence of God, and he needed something which went far beyond the mere pardon of his transgression. Pardon is very necessary when things go wrong in our lives, and whatever sin we may have committed we need the pardon of God on that account. But this dear man of God, there back in the Old Testament age, realized that he needed something more than forgiveness.

He had become strangely conscious of a defilement of spirit and of mind. And so we have this remarkable question, a question which I think indicates something of the sheer pessimism that has come over him. He is aware that his defilement is so great that he can hardly conceive of there being a cleansing power adequate to deal with it.

Well now of course we live in the full glare of the New Testament revelation, and how happy we should be. We know more than Job ever knew. We know that God has made provision not only for the pardon of sin, but for the cleansing of it.

But before we come to that this afternoon, I think it is very necessary for us to realize how very much we too need the cleansing of defilement that the scriptures speak about. In an age when gross immodesty and rampant impurity assault the citadel of man's soul from every conceivable quarter, in an age when the moral climate of society has become the breeding ground of the vilest and the most violent kind of moral viruses ever to afflict humankind, we need to know whether there is a means of making us clean again when once we have become defiled and besmirched as we pass through the various places of duty in life. And it is to this that I want to turn our thoughts this afternoon.

I want us, God helping us, to see that the Lord has made ample provision not only to deal with the guilt of sin which requires pardon, but to deal with this something that Job was so terribly concerned about in his day, and which many a saint in our day and age has longed for and wept for, namely the cleansing away of sin's defilement, that we may know again an intimacy of fellowship with God in consequence of which we daily walk with him in the awareness of his reality. I want to talk this afternoon then about this very important subject of cleansing, and I want to be rather general, though I trust that that does not mean we are not going to be helpful and personally helpful. But I find the more I have to do with Christian work and Christian ministry that there are scores of Christian people who really have never appreciated the biblical doctrine of cleansing, and in consequence of which I find that there are multitudes of people who carry with them almost to their dying day a sense of defilement and impurity that cripples their witness.

It impairs their prayer life, and I know men whose mouths have been shut in the pulpit. There are certain things they've been unable to mention because they've carried with them a conscience that has never been cleansed. Come with me then, and we consider first of all this afternoon the condition that makes cleansing a necessity.

Now we're going to be very general, but we must start here. The consequences of sin go well beyond our mere involvement, as we have said, in its dread penalty. You read Psalm 51, and you will see that David, in consequence of his terrible sin with Bathsheba, not only did he become aware of the fact that he needed pardon, but he felt there was something else, the same kind of experience as Job.

Something else needed to be dealt with. Wash me thoroughly from my sins, he says. Purge me with I shall be clean.

In other words, David too had become dreadfully conscious of the need of cleansing. You read the first epistle written by Paul to the Corinthians, and then come to the second epistle. Start in chapter 6 verse 11, go on to the first verse of chapter 7, and you see the same kind of subject dealt with.

Turn to the New Testament in 1 John chapter 1, verses 5 to 9 particularly, and then turn to the epistle of James, and you will find that James deals also with the same urgent necessity of our multitudes of people. Now in connection with the condition that makes cleansing a necessity, I want to ask three questions and try to answer them. How do we become defiled? What are the sources, the primary sources of defilement? And I think that the Bible answers that they are three, they are threefold.

We become defiled first of all by contact with the world which is evil, the world outside of us. Secondly, we become defiled because of the influence of the old carnal nature within us. And thirdly, we become defiled

by the immediate communication of Satan to us.

Just a word about these. The world is the first source of defilement. That is, society in its rebellion against God and against His will.

Society in its refusal to accept what God has revealed to be right and wrong. Society that in consequence has made up its own code of ethics, if we may so call it. And what a terrible code it is as we understand it in our day and age.

The fashions and the thought forms of the age, the age that is in rebellion against God, have their own way of defiling the saint. You listen to what the world says, you receive its insidious thoughts and entertain them in your mind and heart, and you become defiled by them. And you will find sometimes that when you're in the most holy exercise of prayer or of worship, those thought forms and concepts that emerge from evil men will follow you, and they'll transform the purest and the holiest thought into something that is unworthy.

The world then is the first source of defilement. It leaves its own peculiar scum upon the spirit of the child of God, and it defiles him. But the same effect can emerge even when we are isolated from the world, and in a measure insulated from it.

You can be at prayer. You can be even at the communion table. The world is outside.

Physically you're not in touch with the world at all. And yet from within your own evil nature, without anyone suggesting anything, you're just left with yourself, your memory, your imagination, your heart, yourself. But because you have the old evil Adamic nature within you, it can send its miry stench into every part of your inner life, and you become defiled.

And then not only that, just as he successfully sprayed the thoughts of our early parents with pernicious and polluting thoughts, so does the devil himself sometimes come near, and he puts his doubts in our minds and his thoughts. So it is then that we can become defiled from three particular sources, three primary sources. The next question I want to ask is this.

What is it that becomes defiled? What are the areas that are defiled in human life? Now again the New Testament I think is quite clear here. Whatever the precise nature of its origin, sin in the form of pollution penetrates the entire life of a man. Paul speaks of sin's polluting influences as impinging upon two aspects.

If you read 2 Corinthians chapter 7 and verse 1, he speaks of the need for cleansing of body and of spirit. Body, spirit, the physical, the spiritual. If you turn to James chapter 4 and verse 8, you will find that James in addressing the people of said that they needed to cleanse their hands and their hearts.

Cleanse your hands, ye sinners, he says, and purify your hearts, ye double-minded. Now have you got it? Here then we are defiled, says Paul and James in concert. We are defiled on the physical plane and on the spiritual.

If you ask me how this comes about, I suppose that Paul would answer, particularly in the context of the Corinthian epistles, that there are certain sensual and sexual vices which defile the very body which is the temple of the Holy Ghost. Do you remember this verse? This verse has frightened quite a number of folk. 1 Corinthians chapter 6 and verse 18, shun immorality, says Paul.

Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body, so that the very body, the organs of the body, the temple of the Holy Ghost, have become defiled in the sight of God. But then there is the inner man that becomes defiled. What James speaks of as the heart, what Paul speaks of as the spirit, the man within, this includes the conscience.

Paul tells us in a number of places how the conscience can become weakened or defiled, 1 Corinthians 8 and verse 7, or it can become seared, 1 Timothy chapter 4 and verse 2. But not only the conscience, the will is weakened, so that what a man would do, he doesn't do or can't do. And the very thing he doesn't want to do, that is the thing he does. His will has become terribly weak, and he's unable to do the right that he knows he ought.

Not only is the conscience affected, and the will, so also is the mind. In writing, for example, to the Corinthians in chapter 3, in the opening verses, Paul tells them there are whole tracts of Christian truth that are important for them, but they can't receive them. He can't, he can't teach them, because they're but babes in Christ, they're carnal.

And I don't need at this stage to describe and to try to show to you what the evidences of that carnality really was. But because of that, you see, their minds could not comprehend Christian truth. Then again, the affections of a man become, they become transformed almost, and diverted from that which is legitimate, and right, and proper, to that which is illegitimate, and which God proscribes.

You have a classical instance in Demas. Demas, says Paul, Demas, in writing to Timothy, the second letter, chapter 4, in verse 10, Demas, he says, has forsaken me, having loved this present world. That surely suffices to show how, how defilement coming from one or more of these three sources, impinges upon the entire human experience.

And the last question I want to ask in this connection is this, what are the consequences of defilement? Defilement has far-reaching consequences. Perhaps we can conveniently sum them up today in this sense, in this way. We can say that the total effect of defilement is to bring a kind of haze between us and God, so that God is no longer a felt reality.

We believe he's there, maybe. We have good reason to believe he's there. But somehow we never touch reality.

We're out of touch. We are almost living in a kind of a fog, in a kind of a maze. Nothing is real.

When we come to pray, well, we go through the, the formalities of prayer, but there's nothing very real about it. And when we come to the word of God, we read it, and we say to ourselves that we believe it, but somehow or other it doesn't become the reality. And one reason for this very often is because a man has become defiled by sin.

My good friend, before we go any further this afternoon, will you permit me to ask the question? It's a lovely afternoon. It's rather sad that we have to introduce a question like this, is it not? Am I speaking to someone who has to confess in the presence of God that all the spiritual things you talk about are nevertheless very unreal to you? Your life is lived, as it were, in a bog land and a fog land where nothing is really clear, and convictions that once you held seem to have whittled away, and you only have mere ideas to take their place. The condition that makes cleansing a necessity.

Secondly, the provision that makes cleansing a possibility. No, Job didn't know the answer to this one. Poor Job, can you imagine it? With this awful, clammy sense of defilement upon his soul, he poses the question, but he doesn't have the answer.

There isn't one, says Job. The prophet Zechariah knew what Job did not. With the enabling and inspiration and revelation of the Spirit of God, the blessed Zechariah saw on the distance seen the opening of a fountain, not only for sin and its guilt, but for sin and its uncleanness.

And you and I are privileged, brethren and sisters in Christ. Oh, that we should be aware of it. We are privileged to live in the full glare of the Christian revelation and of the divine action in Christ whereby God has done precisely this.

Well now, let's come to it. Scripture appears to point to a threefold provision whereby we may bring a clean thing out of an unclean. First of all, we read of the cleansing word.

The cleansing word. Did you ever realize that part of the ministry of the word of God is to make us clean and keep us clean? Now, I believe that there are many Christians who've never really been made alert to the fact that it is part of the ministry of the scriptures just to do this. Make us clean and keep us clean.

But the word testifies concerning itself that this is indeed its God-appointed ministry, or one of its ministries. The word that proceeds from God is a powerful word. The epistle to the Hebrews speaks of it as quick or alive and powerful.

But the point is this. It's not only powerful, it is morally powerful. It is a word that is active in the same sense as God is active.

It is God's agent. It is God's word. And God is a holy God.

And God is concerned with the business of dealing with sin in all its manifold ramifications. So is his word. So that wherever the word of God is let loose and liberated and proclaimed and received as we heard so wonderfully on Saturday night, received into the depths of the heart and allowed to do its mighty work, what happens is this.

That word will save us from sin and will keep sin away from us. It's a cleansing word. It's a purging word.

Jesus could look into the face of his disciples and say, now he says you're clean because of the word that I've spoken to you. Brethren, you and I cannot be receiving this word properly if we are not a cleansed people. It is part of its ministry.

Sometimes it takes the part of a mirror and we look in it and we see in it as in a mirror how besmirched and begrimed we've become. And we become aware of spots here and blemishes there, of how sin has impinged upon us in this area of our life or in that. And as in a mirror we see ourselves.

Sometimes it becomes a lamp unto our feet and it shows us the way out of the quagmire. Then it becomes a gold whereby God makes us, like Job of old, hurry out of sorrow. It becomes the instrument whereby he causes us to move and to move as we heard this morning, quickly to flee, to shun the mirey way.

Sometimes it is a word that woos us away. And then when we've come away and come to the provision, it purges us. And then when we are purged, if we leave it lodged in our hearts, it becomes a moral antiseptic so that we may say as the psalmist, thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee.

It becomes a divine antiseptic in the soul. And when the word takes its place in the empire of the human heart, the believer's heart, sin may be kept at bay. Oh, it's a wonderful word, the word of God.

But along with the cleansing word, we have the cleansing blood. The whole of the Godhead is involved in our cleansing as well as in every other aspect of our salvation. And along with the cleansing word of God, we have the cleansing blood of Christ.

Our entire salvation as planned and purposed by the Father and made possible by means of the, is made possible by means of the blood of Christ. Everything ultimately is traced to the will of the Father and the work of the Son and particularly the work of the Son on the cross of Calvary, where he paid the price of our salvation and purchased our redemption in all its glory and in all its wonder. Well could John speak to those addressed by him in his epistle and say, the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us.

But then along with the cleansing word and the cleansing blood is the cleansing spirit. Both Old and New Testaments loudly assert this. The symbolism may change.

In Ezekiel 36 and 25 it may be the symbol of water. In Malachi chapter 3 and verse 2 and again in Matthew 3 and 11 for example, it may be the symbol of fire. The symbol may change, but the source of the operation is quite obvious and the ministry is quite clear.

Water cleanses. Fire purges. So that one of our hymns cries out in this way, Be it by water or by fire, O make me clean.

My dear friend, there is none other than the Holy Spirit of God who can apply to your soul and heart the mighty redeeming and cleansing provision of the blood of Christ as it was purposed in the mind and the heart of God. He is the one who is able infallibly to apply all the healing merits of the blood and of the word. So that when Paul writes to the Corinthians, you remember he can assure them that they have been really cleansed.

Some of them had been grossly defiled. You remember this passage of scripture? I can never read it without a frog in the throat or something of that kind. Do you not know, says Paul, that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, he says, neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.

And such were some of you, but, glorious but, but, says Paul, you are washed. And I want that word to come to each one of us this afternoon, whether we realize our need of it or not. The Holy Spirit of God is the infallible applier of the merits of the blood and of the word, so that though your sins be a scarlet, they can be white as snow.

That brings me to the last thing this afternoon, the condition that makes cleansing a necessity, the provision that makes cleansing a possibility. Now we come to the action that makes cleansing a reality. So far we've stressed that cleansing is the action of God, and so it is.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is, as our brother John Stott would have us say, it is the gift of the sovereign God. And we must ever remember that it is the Lord's doing.

We cannot in that sense cleanse ourselves. And yet, when we come to the New Testament, and indeed in some places in the old, against the background of that basic and that primary fact, the Bible tells us that

we must get on with the business of cleansing ourselves. Isaiah, for example, in speaking to the people of his day, chapter 1 and verse 16, doesn't hesitate to tell them, cleanse yourselves, he says.

And then when we come to the second epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, he encourages the Corinthians in these words, let us cleanse ourselves, he says, from every defilement of the body and of the spirit. And James says the same, cleanse your hands, purify your hearts, he double-minded. Now the thought, of course, is this.

God has made the provision, and insofar as you and I have become aware of our need of defilement and of the urgent need of it, it is God who is active within us. Now we must become co-operators with God, and we must cleanse ourselves. We must use the provision that God has made available for us.

We must by faith lay hold upon the promises and what the promises hold in their bosom for us. We must make them all our own. We must walk in the way of the scriptures.

We must plead with the Holy Spirit. We must apply the blood. What must we do? There may be someone asking for the, a very practical and a very quick answer to this, this afternoon.

Dare we try to give a brief answer? I suppose verses 5 to 9 in 1 John, chapter 1, give us, in brief words, some clear indication what a man must do in this context. In order to become aware of my defilement, if I am defiled, the thing that I must do is this. I must, in the words of Saint John, I must, I must learn to walk in the light.

And the light, of course, is God. God is light. And that means nothing less than this.

I must bring all my life and bear it under the glare of his holy eye.

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