

## **Unclean**

### **Luke 13:20-21**

#### **Winning Sermon in the 2006 Baptist Heritage Preaching Contest**

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One of the hardest things to take about Jesus is that he kept getting things wrong. His disciples and other followers tried to help him. They really did. But how can you help a guy who keeps having lunch with tax collectors? What can you do for a man who is constantly touching lepers and blind people and children? What possible hope can you offer a rabbi and teacher who insists on talking to and about women all the time? And do not think the Pharisees did not notice that woman thing. Did they notice! Jesus did not just talk to nice Jewish women. Oh, no. He had to talk to prostitutes and adulteresses and Samaritans, and he had to touch women, sick women with those woman sicknesses.

Jesus was constantly telling stories about woman stuff. I mean, for Pete's sake, does he have to talk about leaven? He was supposed to be a rabbi. Did he not know that leaven is unclean? Did he not read that part about how at sacred times you are supposed to prepare your bread without the leaven? Did not the leaders of his synagogue explain that leaven was then regarded as an unclean thing, which was a big deal for a people obsessed with the concept of spiritual cleanliness?

Then Jesus started telling them that the kingdom of God is like a woman who is so foolish that she tries to hide leaven, the yeast, in bread dough and subsequently leavens the whole batch of dough. What did she expect to happen? There are not many worse places to hide leaven than in

a batch of dough. What were the disciples supposed to do with that little doozy of a story, which taught that the kingdom of God is like a clueless woman? If they go around telling that, they will not have to wait until the Pharisees stone them, for the women will stone them just for making women look bad!

If only Jesus had realized how wrong he was, we would not have all this confusion today. If just one little time Jesus had put some woman back in her place, the whole debate would be over. But that is the problem. As usual, Jesus did not cooperate. I would bet that sometimes people just wanted to nail him to a tree or something and say, “You are getting it all wrong!” But Jesus kept pushing.

Take his encounter with Mary and Martha, for example. That story is a great example of how Jesus always got everything backwards. Here was Martha—she just had come home from a WMU luncheon where they were working on their fundraising project for the widows and orphans fund. She spent the morning calling on the sick people that her brother (who is the official “follower”) was supposed to be in charge of visiting. She took each invalid a casserole, and to the family with the new baby, she took some swaddling that she had embroidered herself. When she got home, she cleaned the house, because the rabbi was coming and bringing all his dirty disciples, and their dirt would make her clean all the more thoroughly. Then she made her fig bars as a special treat.

When the rabbi arrived and started talking, Martha looked around for her sister, Mary. And where was Mary? Sitting down. Next to the rabbi. She was just sitting there, like there was nothing to do. And Martha said, “Teacher, make Mary do the dishes—after all, I made the fig bars!” And Jesus has a chance to put everything back in its proper order—the men were to sit on their fat tushies and listen to rabbis while the women were to make sure the men could do so in comfort. But what did Jesus say? He said, “Martha, you worry about everything when only one thing matters—and Mary has chosen to do that which matters. That will not be taken from her” (Luke 10:38-42).

Jesus just did not get it. He did not understand that women and everything to do with them were unclean. The law made very clear that while women were to be taken care of and treated with respect, they also, on a regular basis, fell into several categories of the ritually unclean. There were also many times when they were in touch with things unclean—everything from blood to the aforementioned leaven. It was clear that while Jesus said he revered the law and seemed to know a good deal about it, he did not understand that the women needed to have a very specific place in the world and that it was dangerous to even let them think of leaving that place. Jesus treated the women as if they were real people. What is more, I would not be surprised if Jesus actually liked women. Incredible! Outrageous! Blasphemous!

What is even odder to consider than Jesus' sympathy toward the women (after all, he did come as the representative of God's love in the world so he can be allowed some leeway there) is that in all of their inspiration, those gospel writers did not edit out all that crazy stuff about the women out. How easy that would have been. The gospel writers, while reciting for their scribes, came to the parable about the kingdom of God being like a mustard seed, and the writers could have simply forgotten to mention the next, pesky parable about the foolish, unclean woman who put unclean leaven in her dough and ruined the whole batch. Who would have known? If the gospel writers had skipped over this parable, then we would not have a problem with all the Protestants who are constantly wanting to read the actual Bible.

Here is the problem with Baptist heritage and with Baptists themselves. They are always picking up the Bible and wanting to read and interpret it for themselves. When you let the uninformed pick up the Bible, you get problems along the lines of those incurred by some of the Jeffersonian slip-ups which made it into our country's official documents. How can your average person be expected to know that when Jefferson said, "All men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights" that he really just meant the white men who owned property, like himself? It is confusing, to say the least, and has caused this country no end of trouble.

With the Bible, we are not just talking about the misapprehension that every individual might have rights; we are talking about immortal souls and understanding our place in the eyes of Almighty God. All those Baptists, wanting to read the Bible and interpret it for themselves have been a thorn in the side of decent society from the get-go. And no single group has been more troublesome than the women.

Take Ann Judson, for example. Now here was a good, mainline Protestant on her way to being a missionary in Burma with her husband Adoniram. And during the voyage, the Judsons searched through the New Testament in its original Greek, no less, and both concluded that they must be baptized upon their arrival in Asia. They chose to leave the Congregational church and become Baptists before they even begin their work as missionaries. And only because of Ann's determination was the Burmese Bible that her husband had labored to translate safeguarded. Ann sewed the manuscript in a pillow and took it to him while he was in prison. Her courage resulted in the protection of the manuscript and ultimately led to its completion.

Ann Judson's radical faith resulted in her living in the midst of a foreign war, giving birth to her daughter while her husband was being held in a Burmese prison, and continuing to do the work of teaching and living and loving as Jesus did—among the people. Eventually, her faith would cost her health and eventually her life, leaving her husband to fend for himself. If Ann Judson had only realized how unclean she was, she might never have picked up the Bible for herself, much less investigated it in its original language. She might not have been so easily persuaded away from her safe, comfortable faith. She might have lived a long, happy life under the wing of a more reasonable, more protective husband.

Or take Dorothy Hazzard, who was a strong woman, a good woman, living in seventeenth-century England. She was a bit unreasonable, perhaps, seeing how the government had just freed everyone from the strictures of the Catholic Church. All English leaders asked in return was that every citizen attend and pay taxes to the Church of England, which was headed by the monarch of England. What could be more reasonable? And yet, Dorothy, a Bible-reader and a favorite

of radical preachers roaming the countryside, read the Bible; something in her readings made her think that she had the right to worship as she felt called by God and that she could defy the established church and the state to attain that right legally. Dorothy did everything from blocking stairwells with her body to protecting preachers who preached on the second floors of homes to manning blockades during the British civil war. She sought out those who would preach the gospel as she saw it—a more biblical gospel. When she found such preachers, she supported and protected them. Where was her sense of shame at her own uncleanness? How did she dare to involve herself in the work of God through the church? What was it about Baptists that encouraged these women to such unseemly self-confidence and such undisciplined behavior?

When you think about it, it all goes back to that parable. Jesus might just as well have said, “The kingdom of God is like a woman who took off on a voyage to be a missionary in a hostile country and died long before her time.” Because if it was not smart to hide leaven in dough, how much more foolish was it for Ann Judson to go to some backwater country to try and save people whom she did not even know and end up dying of a disease she would not have even heard of back home?

Perhaps the best example of this wasted-life issue was Lottie Moon. An educated woman in the 1800s, Lottie Moon might have stayed in the United States and helped all the educated women in America understand both their gifts and their limits. Instead, Lottie took off for China. Not content just to teach English to the women there, Lottie stepped out of her limited role as a woman and stepped into the role of an evangelist. She dared to preach and teach both men and women throughout the Chinese countryside. Instead of quietly going about her business of winning the Chinese people over to Christ, she actively campaigned, getting the women at home all riled up so that they started thinking that they too should be doing something for missions. It is entirely possible that by now, Baptists worldwide could be known as a much calmer, much more distinguished and respectable denomination had not Lottie Moon gotten all those women worked up over spreading the gospel to all the poor and undeserving folks throughout the world. Baptists everywhere pay the price for the unreasonable demands she made of the Southern

Baptist Foreign Mission Board and the docile Southern Baptist churches.

I myself have been tainted by the undisciplined nature of Baptist women. I come from a long line of Baptist women. My great-grandmother was the wife of a Baptist minister. She reared seven children and ran a farm and cooked and sewed. She failed to convey to her three daughters how unclean their nature was, and consequently she raised three strong-willed women, who each went on to do things like teach Sunday School and raise money for missions. My grandmother, Frona, was the daughter of that Baptist minister. She taught Sunday School and persistently read her own Bible. Frona's Bible is a perfect example of what happens when you give women free reign with a Bible. Instead of keeping it pure and unadulterated, she made notes and comments on just about every page.

My other grandmother, Mary Sue Dixon, was my father's mother. She also was a Baptist woman. She insisted on working outside the home instead of remaining in her proper place. She ran a diner in South Boston and worked for a bank in Richmond. She also was not nearly as subservient a wife as she should have been. I was around her a lot, and I cannot think of a single instance of her being truly submissive to my grandfather.

My mother, Barbara Dixon, is a Baptist woman. She grew up in a Baptist home, but I think the fact that her mother felt she had a right to read the Bible for herself confused my mother into thinking the same thing. She ended up in seminary and then married my father—a Baptist minister. She could have redeemed herself. But no! She actually became so involved in the church that she ended up teaching Sunday School to both men and women, leading retreats and even prayer meetings, and essentially fulfilling the role of a minister, although, to her credit, she never got a red cent for doing so.

I blame them. If it were not for all those women, the ones with the larger place in Baptist history and those in my family with the most significant role in my own history, I would not be studying to become a minister today. I would not be confused about my unclean nature, but would be able to embrace it, along with the humbler role of background noise and support-giver.

I would not be trying to sit at Jesus' feet but would occupy myself with the proper business of women—cooking the fig bars and cleaning the dishes. If you get down to it, it is Jesus who must take the greatest blame. I am sure that if he had not sent out those confusing messages about women, Baptist women would not have picked up on his words and made such a mess of things for the rest of us. If Jesus had only had a better sense of decorum and expressed more of an interest in maintaining a comfortable status quo, maybe those Sadducees and Pharisees would not have gotten so upset with him. Jesus kept proving that he cared more about some obscure woman he stumbled upon in the marketplace than he did about helping those in power keep their stranglehold over the poor and the unclean. I am sure that his disciples tried to point this out to him, but he was stubborn.

In any case, it is refreshing to see so many Baptists trying to put things right. The more conservative Baptists feel comfortable in coming right out and supporting a segregated, male-dominated pastorate and leadership, but the liberals are doing their jobs as well, managing on a fairly consistent basis not to actually hire the women they so blithely send off to seminary, except as children's workers or assistants to the pastor. Sometimes when your heritage has gone a bit awry, you have to take time out to get it straight. Having spent a good 300 to 400 years conveying the message to women that they might expect the same kind of salvation that the men have been offered, it may take a good bit of work to remind the women of their error. Still, it seems that Baptists over the last thirty years have been working hard at it. They might yet achieve their goal of creating a female population which thinks of itself, in spite of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, as persistently and hopelessly unclean.

The problem is that no matter how much we want it to be otherwise, the kingdom of God is like a woman who took and hid three measures of leaven in her dough until it was all leavened. Whatever we might have expected the kingdom of God to be, it is surprisingly different, it is transformational, like yeast—it is a catalyst for change. The problem is that once you have sat at the feet of Jesus, you can never go back to doing anything else. Once Jesus has let you in

on the great truth that God's love is all-encompassing and that God is not worried about such little things as social niceties, your heart is opened and your soul expands, completely leavened, thoroughly transformed. Man or woman, rich or poor, chocolate brown, or peachy skinned, at the feet of Jesus you become more than what the world told you to be, more than you ever thought you could be. Jesus opened that door with the message of abundant, eternal life. The gospel writers walked right through it, and some Baptists, both men and women, have crossed that threshold behind them ever since. Ann Judson, Dorothy Hazzard, Lottie Moon, Frona Williams, Mary Sue Dixon, and Barbara Dixon all took Jesus at his word, believing themselves to have been invited to the table alongside anyone else who accepted the invitation. And I will tell you that when God sends his one and only begotten son into the world to fling a door open, it can be nearly impossible to get that door to close up again. Amen.

### **Resources Used**

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