

## Things That Sound Biblical... But Aren't: "Cleanliness is Next to Godliness"

*Theme: Clearing a few misconceptions about God's word.*

- A. Last month we began a year-long, monthly look at common phrases that are often in use. Phrases that sound biblical... often believed and portrayed to be biblical... but aren't.
1. We started by looking at a common misuse of an actual biblical phrase: **"where there are two or three gathered in my name..." (Matt. 18.20)**
  2. Since that sermon I have had many people ask me about other phrases that they would like to see covered:
    - a. *"God helps those who help themselves."*
    - b. *"God will never give us more than we can handle."*
    - c. *"God don't like ugly."*
    - d. *"God needed another angel."* (Used at the loss of a loved one)
    - e. Even the popularly used phrasing of what is called *"the Sinner's Prayer."*
  3. These are great and we will look at them as we go along... as well as others.
- B. Today we look at one that I have joked about previously: **"Cleanliness is next to godliness."** It may sound biblical, but it is a phrase (as it is typically used) that does not find its origin in scripture.

### I. Examining the Phrase

- A. "Cleanliness is next to godliness" is a phrase that is often used (perhaps by well-intended parents & grandparents) to extoll the virtue of tidiness and good personal hygiene.
1. It elevates personal cleanliness to a virtue of such importance that it is superseded only by godliness (religious piety/fidelity to God's will).
  2. It has been noted by some writes that this phrase (or some form of it) may have originated as some form of ancient Hebrew or Babylonian proverb.
  3. **However the modern usage of the phrase is traced to two people:**
    - a. **Sir Francis Bacon (1605)** a scientist and philosopher who wrote *Advancement of Learning*: *"Cleanliness of body was ever deemed to proceed from a due reverence to God, to society, and to ourselves."*
    - b. **John Wesley (1778)** wrote in a sermon titled *On Dress*: *"Slovenliness is no part of religion. Cleanliness is indeed next to godliness."*
- B. Two recent scientific studies (2009 by BYU & 2014 by Rice, Penn State, and Indiana) have suggested a link between clean environments/smell and moral/ethical behavior.
1. The BYU study stated: *"Basically, our study shows that morality and cleanliness go hand-in-hand."* (Galinsky)
    - a. They found that test subjects in **"clean scented"** rooms were less likely to exploit the trust of their partners in money matters, in contrast to test subjects in normal rooms.

- b. They also found that test subjects in **“Windex-scented”** rooms were significantly more interested in volunteering compared to those in normal scented rooms.
  - c. **JOKE:** So the key to increased church involvement is Windex! If you come in next Sunday and smell Windex then you know what’s up! ☺
- C. While I do not place much stock in these studies (moral-ethical behavior is a matter of personal will not smell) – the idea of cleanliness as a component of godliness CAN be rooted in the concept of “stewardship.”**
- 1. **Stewardship** = *“The responsible overseeing and protection of something considered worth caring for and preserving.” (Dictionary.com)*
  - 2. Taking care of our bodies and our physical blessings is a form of stewardship of the blessings that the LORD gives us. **1 Cor. 6.19-20** (the principle can be extrapolated from this verse that warns against sexual immorality).

## II. The Biblical Concept of “Cleanliness”

- A. Even though “cleanliness is next to godliness” is not a biblical concept... the distinction between “clean” and “unclean” played a significant role within Judaism.**
- 1. For the Jew, the concept of **“clean/unclean”** is very similar to the concept of **“holy/profane”** and it each had societal and spiritual ramifications.
    - a. Israel was to be a kingdom of priests – a holy people: **Ex. 19.5-6**
    - b. God’s people were called to be holy, and this holiness was rooted required because the LORD is holy: *“For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate (devote-dedicate) yourselves therefore, and be holy for I am holy...” (Lev. 11.44)*
    - c. **“Clean”** directly related to being able to be in God’s presence and was tied to sacrifices, dietary restrictions, and moral-ethical behavior in line with God’s will -
    - d. **“Unclean”** referred to a condition that hindered one before a pure and holy God – a condition that could result in exclusion from society and even death. (**Numbers 5.2-3; Lev. 10.1-2**)
    - e. In fact accidentally touching unclean things (like dead bodies, etc.) rendered that individual unclean and the individual carried the guilt associated with uncleanness. (**Lev. 5.2-3**)
    - f. Sinful behavior in the Old Testament (that which is counter to the will of a pure and holy God: **Lev. 18.1-5**) also rendered one unclean: **Jeremiah 13.27; Psalm 106.34-39 (compare: James 4.8)**
      - i. Things like incest, bestiality, homosexuality, and adultery all rendered one unclean: **Lev. 18.29**
      - ii. Such practices even defiled the land: **Amos 7.17; Lam. 1.8**
      - iii. **R.K. Harrison:** *“...to be clean meant not merely the negative aspects of being free from disease or defilement but the positive demonstration in daily life of God’s high moral and ethical qualities of absolute purity, mercy, justice, and grace.” (HIBD)*
  - 2. Throughout the Bible, Jews were required to deal with uncleanness (whatever the cause) in very similar manners. (Lexham Bible Dict.)

- a. Stopping the behavior
  - b. Washing with water for purification
  - c. Offering a sin/purification offering (of various types)
  - d. The Law established the principle that blood made atonement for human life (**Lev. 17.11**) and a blood sacrifice involved the highest form of purification (**Lev. 14.19-20**).
- B. This simply scratches the surface of the Hebrew concept of clean/unclean and how it related to life before a pure and holy God. **Though we do not observe “clean/unclean” physical regulations today the NT is filled with the concept of the need for Christians to be morally clean as the new priesthood of God: 1 Peter 2.9; 1.14-16 An unclean people made clean and given purpose through the blood of Christ: Hebrews 9.13-14****

### III. The Heart of the Matter

- A. Though external forms of defilement (uncleanliness) were a part of the old covenant and taught us about the nature of God... Jesus got to the “heart” of the matter in His fuller disclosure of the Father.**
1. In dealing with a question of ceremonial handwashing before eating, Jesus revealed that the true thing that defiles a person comes from within the heart... not from outside the body! **Reference... Mark 7.18-23**
  2. The things that defile a person before God (makes unclean) is the stuff that **originates within and reveals the content of the heart** – for sin begins in the heart and sin renders one unclean! **James 1.14-15**
  3. James addressed the heart issue when he calls upon offenders in the early church to stop their hurtful, worldly actions: **James 4.7-10**
  4. **This desire for a clean heart/conscience is central to Peter’s instruction about the significance of baptism!**
    - a. It isn’t about physical cleanliness.
    - b. It’s about moral/spiritual cleanliness: **1 Peter 3.21 NASB**
- B. The ancient proverb still holds true about the importance of the heart: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” (Prov. 4.23)**

#### **Conclusion:**

*The phrase “cleanliness is next to godliness” is not a biblical concept though it can relate to good stewardship. However the idea of moral purity and cleanliness have meaning for Jews and Christians. Jesus was more concerned with moral purity for that originates in the heart itself! **How is your heart?***