

Life with an infant can recalibrate your entire understanding of clean & unclean. We could talk about the time I let Penny run around with no diaper for a few minutes. Of course, she decided it was the perfect time to empty her bladder & her bowels. We could discuss the time when somehow – it's still a mystery – one of her diaper tabs got caught on the carpet while she was crawling downstairs, exposing the contents of her very full diaper. By the time I heard her surprised response –ooh!– and then peered around the corner there was just a layer of stuff... everywhere. We shall never mention this again.

But for all our messes, **the epicenter** of messiness *has* to be the rug under our dining table. In any house, that location has to be the epicenter for the Big Bang of baby impact. We even prepared for it. One of my great achievements before Penny was born was purchasing an indoor/outdoor rug for the dining table. It's designed to be low-maintenance. It's designed to take a beating. But it still has to be cleaned. And over the past year as Penny has become more talented in her messiness, I've found myself muttering the words of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. Whether it's a compacted blueberry, a smashed piece of chocolate, or a dried patch of spaghetti sauce I find myself scrubbing and muttering those famous words: **OUT. DAMN. SPOT.**

Life with an infant can recalibrate your entire understanding of clean & unclean. But of course, **we don't expect a 19-month-old to follow those rules.** At

least, not yet. Eventually she'll figure it out. Not because she'll become a slave to rules. Because she'll learn how some rules keep food in her mouth and off the floor, allowing her to enjoy eating and allowing us to avoid a house with rodents & mold. The rules serve a bigger purpose; the goal of human flourishing.

There's also this. I've noticed that **my understanding of clean & unclean is changing**. I don't just mean my standards of clean, mind you, that's a different story. My *understanding* of the entire concept is changing. I'm learning to understand a clean house **less as something to achieve**, let alone something to show off. Instead, I'm learning to understand clean & unclean **in the context of love**. Whenever we clean our daughter's messes, we don't blame her for failing to follow the rules. Our cleaning itself is an act of love. And along the way, we're inviting her into patterns of flourishing. Rules are a tool, but rules are not the joy of parenthood. The great joy of parenthood is fostering our child's flourishing.

Maybe a clean house isn't your thing. Maybe you've never worried about preserving the tidiness of your domain. But **we all have something**. We all have something to show others that our lives are in order. Maybe it's your wardrobe or physique. Maybe it's your hair (lucky you), the car you drive, or the gadgets you use. Maybe it's your job or the way you portray yourself on social media. Maybe it's even the fact that you go to church (anyone...?). We all have something to show the world that our lives are in order. That's normal.

And it's also **how categories of clean & unclean worked** in ancient Israel.

The Law of Moses gave signals to show that your life was in order with God & neighbor: clean or unclean. We still do a version of the same thing. It's always been important to show that our lives are in order. Think about it like this. It's one thing if you come to our house and the place is messy. We've got a baby. Deal with it. It's more awkward if we host an event for the Bishop and he walks into a pig sty. If our house gets really unclean, we have government agencies that will do something about it; even taking a child out of a home that's unclean. Right? We expect parents to provide basic levels of health & safety.

That's how clean & unclean worked in the ancient world. It was about **basic levels of health & safety with God & neighbor**. The Law of Moses gave the terms for their health code. We don't know exactly what was required but the Pharisees think Jesus & his followers are putting everyone's health at risk. They're risking everyone's health with God. They're not just threatening their own health by failing to ceremonially wash hands & cups; they're threatening everyone's health by acting like God is okay with that.

That's the conflict in today's Gospel. And the message we hear is that **following Jesus recalibrates our understanding of clean & unclean**. It's not about saying God doesn't care. God cares deeply about keeping our lives in order. After all, our God is a God of order, not chaos. In Genesis God delights in a highly

structured pattern of creation over 7 days. That's good. No one ever wants gravity to become unreliable. It matters. We need rules that allow life to flourish. But here's the key: those rules never create life. At most, they shape an environment where life can flourish. The goal is flourishing. Rules are a tool that serve the greater goal.

I wonder if it's more like this. I wonder if the way Jesus recalibrates our understanding of clean & unclean is kind of like the way an infant recalibrates our understanding. When we're following Jesus, having our lives in order is **less about something to achieve**, let alone something to show off. It's more about our response to God's love. Whenever we mess up, God never blames us for failing to follow the rules. Instead God comes beside us, in the person of Jesus, as an act of love. And along the way, God invites us into patterns of flourishing. Because God delights in our joy & flourishing.

That's what the Letter of James wants us to hear. Today James is inviting us to gaze up at the "Father of lights," the One who gives "every perfect gift" for our lives. God delights in our joy & flourishing. And even though James is famous for telling us how to act, here at the beginning he shows his cards. He reveals that he's completely focused on our hearts. He invites us to gaze into God's word as if we're staring at ourselves in the mirror. He says our actions are a way of "continuing" in God word, after gazing into God's commands (Jas. 1.25).

Then he gets to the rules. He talks about “pure” religion by using three rules. First, he says, get a handle on your tongue. It’s powerful. In chapter 3 he’ll launch into a discourse on the power, and danger, of the human tongue. Your tongue, more than anything, reveals your heart, and becomes either a source of life or death. Second, he says, care for people who are weak and vulnerable. Don’t go looking to impress others. Serve the least, the lost, and the left-out. Third, he says, stay clean. Keep your lives in order.

Those are the rules for “pure” religion. They’re good. We need rules that allow life to flourish. But here’s the key. Christian life is never just about following the rules because **rules never create life**. At most, they shape an environment where life can flourish. The goal is flourishing. Rules are simply a tool to serve that greater goal. Christian life is about being transformed into the image of Jesus. Everything we do, every rule, is directed to that purpose because Jesus is the source & the model for our flourishing. Rules are a tool, but rules are never the joy of Christian life. The great joy of Christian life is experiencing God’s love, being nourished with God’s goodness, and allowing God to make us agents of flourishing for the world. *Amen.*