A Biblical and Theological Perspective

This question often arises from a reading of *Matthew 15:2* and *Luke 11:38*, where it appears Jesus and His disciples are being criticized for eating without washing their hands. But a careful theological and contextual examination shows something deeper than simply hygiene.

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1. The Accusation Was About Tradition, Not Hygiene

> *Matthew 15:1–2 (ESV):*
> “Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.'”

The Pharisees weren’t accusing the disciples of unsanitary behavior, but of violating *the tradition of the elders* a set of oral laws added by religious leaders over time. These were not commands from God (as in the Mosaic Law), but human traditions that developed over centuries.

Similarly, in Luke 11:37–38, the issue is ceremonial:

> *Luke 11:38 (ESV):*
> "The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner."

The Greek word used here for "wash" is *baptizō*, which often implies a ritual immersion, not just casual hand washing. The Pharisee's shock wasn't about hygiene it was about Jesus not following a ritual purification custom.

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2. Jesus and the Disciples Practiced Normal Cleanliness

It is reasonable to believe that Jesus and His disciples followed normal hygienic practices. Jesus was not against physical cleanliness in fact, He washed His disciples' feet (John 13:5), a humbling act of service and hygiene.

> *John 13:10 (ESV):*
> "Jesus said to him, 'The one who has bathed does not need to

> wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean...'"

This shows Jesus acknowledged the importance of cleanliness, but also pointed to a deeper spiritual meaning behind physical acts.

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3. The Real Issue: Elevating Human Tradition Above God's Word

Jesus confronted the Pharisees not because He was against ritual itself, but because they elevated tradition above the commandment of God.

> *Mark 7:2–4 (ESV):*
> "They saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed... and there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches."
>
> *Then in Mark 7:6–9, Jesus rebukes them:*
> "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me... You leave the commandment of God and hold to

> the tradition of men.’”

Thus, Jesus used this moment to teach that true defilement comes from within not from breaking man-made rules.

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4. Spiritual Cleanliness Over Ceremonial Acts

> *Matthew 15:17–19 (ESV):*
> “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.”

Jesus emphasized that righteousness is a matter of the heart. Clean hands do not equal a clean heart. The Pharisees focused on outward appearance, but Jesus called for inward transformation (see also *Psalm 51:10* “Create in me a clean heart, O God”).

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5. What This Means for Believers Today

This teaching challenges us to:

- Avoid elevating man-made traditions above Scripture.
- Focus on inward purity rather than outward performance.
- Understand that obedience to God flows from a transformed heart, not rituals.
- Still uphold basic cleanliness and hygiene, as a matter of health and respect, even though it’s not tied to righteousness.

Jesus and His disciples did not violate God’s law by not washing their hands ceremonially. Rather, they exposed the emptiness of outward religion without inner transformation. They likely observed normal hygiene, but did not submit to traditions that held no spiritual value. True cleanliness before God comes from the heart a heart purified by faith and grace, not by external rituals.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” *Matthew 5:8 (ESV)*

May the Lord guide us to walk in true holiness, from the inside out.

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