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“If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Matt 15:1-2, 10-14).

Jer 30:1-2, 12-15, 18-22; Matt 14:22-36 or Matt 15:1-2, 10-14

The current focus on racism will provide many history lessons for young people who may never have heard about the signs on drinking fountains for white and “colored” people. These Jim Crow era restrictions make explicit the kind of “purity” standards whites imposed to enforce racial separation.

The purity laws during Jesus' time also masked caste separation in Jewish society. The scribes and Pharisees exhibited their superiority with elaborate rituals of hand washing before dining. In doing this they also avoided contact with the "unwashed" poor, who could not observe this level of cleanliness in ordinary circumstances.

Jesus upends the claim that failure to practice ritual purity rules renders someone unclean by saying that it is not what goes into our mouths but what comes out of them that defiles us. Evil thoughts and words reveal an evil, calculating heart. The scribes and Pharisees put on a good show of social piety, but their private lives and hidden deceits and violent intentions are the real measure of their fidelity to the Law. Jesus' remarks challenged these religious elites, but instead of debating him, they complained to his disciples.

Like the prophet Jeremiah, Jesus does not spare these backdoor hypocrites, and he warns his disciples that they are "the blind leading the blind." This is a direct challenge to those who called themselves guides and teachers, but it is just the wind up to the full-throated critique Jesus launches against them in Chapter 23 of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus reserves his deepest indignation for those who lead others astray. Their greatest fault was to misrepresent God, who is merciful to the poor, while inflating themselves as wise and important.

We are not accustomed to this side of Jesus, but behind his indignation was his great compassion for ordinary people, especially the poor and the weak, whose suffering is often caused by proud and powerful people who love to make their importance and authority felt. These so-called spiritual experts did not know God themselves, and they prevented others from finding God. They multiplied rules and piled them on the shoulders of others while neglecting the essentials of justice and love.

As disciples of Jesus, we are challenged to pray for pure hearts and to imitate his compassion for the oppressed, excluded, discriminated against and abused. The more we know Jesus the more we will know God. And if the Gospels show us the real Jesus, then even in our merciful God there must be room for some indignation for those who harm the most vulnerable and innocent among us.

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