



**THE
EVERYDAY
GOSPEL**

*A theology of
washing the dishes*

Tim Chester





CONTENTS

5

The Unhappy Legalist

9

*Washing the dishes is a God-like Activity #1:
Ordering Chaos*

14

*Washing the Dishes is a God-like Activity #2:
Serving Others*

22

When Washing the Dishes Goes Bad

25

When You Should Not Wash Up

30

Everyday Life as Divine Revelation

37

Your Kitchen Sink Can Be a Holy Place

46

Everyday Mission



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THE UNHAPPY LEGALIST

How do you know a legalist has washed the dishes?

It might sound like the first half of a joke. But I am serious.

You might not consider washing the dishes one of the pressing issues facing the church today. But it is one most Christians face two or three times a day. How should the gospel inform our washing of the dishes? What does a theology of it look like? What is holy washing of dishes? How can we consecrate this work?

The point, of course, is not that washing the dishes is more important than other things. Rather, it represents countless ordinary activities we do each day. How does the gospel shape our attitude and approach to everyday life? Is Christian faith for Monday as well as Sunday mornings?

So let us come back to our opening question. How do you know a legalist has washed the dishes?





The answer is: They wash up most of the cutlery and crockery, but they leave the pans ‘to soak’ and they do not wipe down the kitchen surfaces. I am a great advocate of soaking, but it can be used as an excuse to leave the job unfinished.

Why is this? Because they are not doing it out of a love for God and others. They are doing it because they feel they ought to, or because they want to be seen to be doing it. So there’s no intrinsic joy in it.

The legalist says, ‘I do this because I ought to do it, even though I don’t want to do it.’ The key word is ‘ought’ – that



**The gospel says,
‘I do this because
I want to.’**

is the motivation. Because they do not really want to do it, they do just enough to claim it is done.



In the case of washing the dishes, they do just enough to be able to say they have done it. Most of the washing is done, but the kitchen is not left clean.

That is why legalists like rules. Rules define your obligation tightly, so you can know when you have done enough.

That is the motivation of the teacher of the law who asks in Luke 10, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Luke tells us, ‘. . . he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”’ (Luke 10:29). Jesus tells him he needs to love God and love his neighbour to inherit eternal life. So





he wants to know when the task of loving his neighbour is complete. He wants to end the day by being able to say, 'Love for God. Tick. Love for neighbour. Tick. Done. Finished.' 'Washing the dishes? No dirty dishes. Tick. Done. Finished. Justified.'

The problem for this unhappy legalist is that Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan which completely explodes all his categories of love for neighbour, making it an impossible task which cannot be ticked off a list.

If legalism says, 'I do this because I ought to do it even though I don't want to,' then what does the gospel say? The gospel says, 'I do this because I want to.' The Holy Spirit gives us new desires, a new motivation. We want to do what is right, we want to love God, we want to love others. We find joy in doing the right thing because it is the right thing.

That does not mean it is not tough. Often the joy is perceived only by faith. We are called to deny ourselves and take up our cross. Life may not often be fun. But we

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can find joy in doing the right thing, in bringing glory to God and loving other people. No one will find joy in the act of being persecuted, for example, but we can rejoice, as the apostles did in Acts 5:41, that we





have been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name of Jesus.

But I think we can go a bit further when it comes to washing the dishes.

How do we find joy in it?



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