

The Gospel of Purity for Oral Learners: Bible Dynamics for Blessing the Unreached

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Abstract

In the Old and New Testament, impurity and uncleanness relegated people as lower-status social ‘outsiders’ in varying levels of shame. The greater the uncleanness, defilement or pollution, the deeper the shame. Likewise, cleanness, sanctification or holiness identified people as higher-status social ‘insiders’ in varying levels of honor. The greater the cleanness, purity, even holiness, the higher the honor. The Mosaic laws of Leviticus defined for the Hebrew people purity codes and the cycle of sanctification. Though strange to Western/secular sensibilities, these purity codes are crucial to understanding both God’s covenant with the Hebrews, as well as the radical nature of Christ’s ministry. Jesus transcended OT laws of ritual cleansing—offering his cure for people in shame due to moral failure, disease, disfiguration, or death. The NT frequently uses “purity language” to describe what God has done in Christ for humanity. The gospel is much more than a cure for sin/guilt; it is also a cure for sin as uncleanness/shame. The Western theological default toward judicial language in presenting the gospel should be supplemented by purity language for better contextualization. The gospel of purity will better resonate with peoples in oral and honor/shame cultures. Many of these peoples are unreached in the Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim blocs—all of whom practice their own distinct cleansing rituals and are honor/shame-oriented in their cultural values. Therefore, developing an awareness of the gospel of purity is a strategic issue.

Keywords: honor and shame, purity, gospel, contextualization

The Gospel of Purity for Oral Learners: Bible Dynamics for Blessing the Unreached

Mark Noll writes, “The contrast between the West and the non-West is never between culture-free Christianity and culturally embedded Christianity, but between varieties of culturally embedded Christianity” (Noll, 2009). Western theology is embedded in its own Western culture (Netland, 2006; Walls, 2006; Newbigin, 1989; Hiebert, 2010). Thus the West promulgates a gospel message with a legal framework—a law- and guilt-based gospel focused on individuals. Moreover, this Western version of the good news is often considered *the exclusive way* to present the gospel (Baker and Green, 2011) and thus comprises an unintentional theological hegemony vis à vis the Majority World church (Whiteman, 2006).

This problem of Western theological bias may be unintentional. Nevertheless, it perpetuates an “assumed,” or truncated gospel (Bosch, 1992; Wu, 2012). The pivotal cultural value of the Bible’s ancient peoples is honor/shame (Malina, 1993; Neyrey, 1998); the general inability of Western Christians to see this represents a blind spot. And since the values of most unreached peoples are, like the Bible societies of the ancient Middle East, collectivistic and shame-based, the removal of this blind spot represents a golden opportunity to contextualize the gospel (Tennent, 2007).

We can partially remove this blind spot by examining the social system and cultural values of the ancient Hebrews. The “cycle of sanctification” was a defining feature of Hebrew society (Hill & Walton, 2009). We will explore the honor/shame dynamics of this system. In our exploration we rely heavily on “mental maps” and “purity language” to explain how Jesus rewrote the social “purity maps” throughout his ministry (deSilva, 2006). The NT has abundant material which uses purity language to articulate what Christ has done for humanity through his life, crucifixion, death and resurrection. We will offer recommendations for ways to promote the awareness of a contextualized “purity gospel” for oral peoples.

A defining feature of the Hebrew social system—the cycle of sanctification

For the Hebrews, everything in life was categorized in relation to the ultimate standard of God’s holiness. Because God desired relationship, he provided specific instructions for how to prepare for and engage with him in worship and daily life. The comments of Hill and Walton concerning the book of Leviticus are fitting:

On the basis of Levitical law, everything in life was either holy or common for the Hebrews. Those things determined common were subdivided into categories of clean and unclean. ... Clean things might become holy through sanctification or unclean through pollution. Holy things could be profaned and become common or even unclean. Unclean things could be cleansed and then consecrated or sanctified to be made holy. Common (i.e., clean) things or persons devoted to God become holy through the mutual efforts of human activity and sanctifying (or consecrating) and of the Lord as the sanctifier. Uncleaness maybe caused by disease, contamination, infection, or sin; it could be cleansed only by ritual washing and sacrifice. (Hill & Walton, 2009, pp. 133–134)

Moving toward honor or shame?

The actions of people in the cycle of sanctification were of two types, as shown in Figure 1 below¹—moving toward honor and the holy, or moving toward shame and the unclean.

1) Actions moving a person toward holiness, toward God (and honor):

- **Cleanse:** People who were unclean needed to go through ritual cleansing in order to become clean. There were rules for many kinds of uncleanness: bodily and sexual discharges including menstruation (Lev 15; 18:19), touching

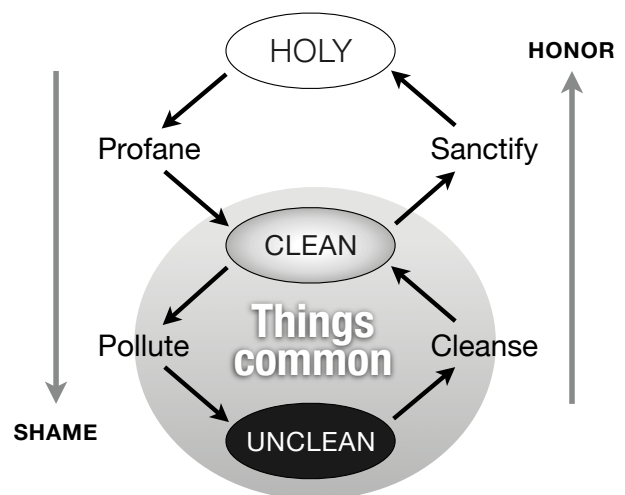


Figure 1: The Cycle of Sanctification

¹ Diagram adapted from Hill & Walton: *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), “Figure 6.1. The Cycle of Sanctification,” p. 133.

someone with disease (Lev 13), touching a corpse (Lev 22:4–6), eating unclean food (Lev 11), and various diseases of which the worst was leprosy (Lev 13).

- **Sanctify:** If a person was clean, he or she could sanctify him or herself to become holy (or separate), in order to enter the presence of God. This was necessary for the Levitical priests in order for them to serve in the temple.

2) Actions moving a person away from holiness, away from God (toward uncleanness/shame):

- **Profane:** A priest who was holy could become profaned by association with anything common (Lev 21). In turn, he would have to be sanctified—a ritual done in cooperation with God—in order to regain his “holiness” and the ability to enter the presence of a holy God.
- **Pollute:** A person who was clean could be polluted and thereby become unclean by a variety of things: sexual activity, menstruation, touching a corpse, eating unclean food, or having a disease. The unclean person would then have to follow the appropriate laws of cleansing to once again regain his or her position of cleanness.²

Jesus heals a leper

Let’s consider a passage of Scripture linking OT and NT concepts about purity.

While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him. And he charged him to tell no one, but “go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them.” (Luke 5:12–14, cf Mark 1:40–44, Luke 5:12–14)

How can we grasp the depth of uncleanness, shame, and exclusion of the “man full of leprosy?” How can we grasp the corresponding brilliance of how Jesus interacts with him? Leviticus offers much insight, especially chapters 13 and 14.³ God commands how to deal with people afflicted by leprosy:

“The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (Lev 13:45–46)

We make note of three things:

- *The leprous person was to make himself unattractive:* He “shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose.” Leprous persons were not allowed to dress up in attempt to cover up their disease.

² See Ezekiel 16:1–62. This chapter describes “The Lord’s Faithless Bride” and vividly shows how great uncleanness corresponded to deep shame in ancient Jewish culture.

³ Leviticus 13 describes the complex process for diagnosing whether a person had leprosy and how they were to be treated. Leviticus 14 describes the complex laws and process for cleansing lepers.

- *The leprous person was to announce his uncleanness:* “he shall ... cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’” He was to proclaim his uncleanness and shame publicly.
- *The leprous person was to be isolated and segregated:* “He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.” The health of the larger community could not be compromised by the disease of the individual. The leper had to be quarantined.

Since the Jews had their identity rooted in their community, the pain and degree of exclusion for the man full of leprosy was extreme. Of course, there were good reasons for isolating people with contagious disease. God was providing boundaries for their survival.

Uncleanness and shame

What may we observe about Jesus and the “man full of leprosy”?

First, we observe that the man full of leprosy had little hope of ever again becoming clean, of ever regaining his honor. How would he ever be reaccepted into his community? His was a life of isolation, embodying despair and shame. ... *Except that Jesus came to town.* And so the leper “fell on his face and begged” Jesus to cure him. In full view of his watching world, he pleaded, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

Second, Jesus “stretched out his hand and touched” the man full of leprosy and said, “Be clean.” Two miracles happened. One, the leper was cleansed. And two, Jesus did not *himself* become unclean! His personal purity was untainted. That a man could transcend the cycle of sanctification was unthinkable to the Jewish mind.

Leprosy was an extreme form of uncleanness, and that uncleanness was easily transferred from one person to another. So it is striking to ponder what other transfer took place in the interaction between Jesus and the leper. When Jesus touched the leper, was the leprous man’s disease and shame absorbed into the compassionate perfection and honor of Jesus? Was the holy purity of Christ somehow transmitted to the man full of leprosy, making him clean?⁴ What new reality was Jesus introducing?⁵

Third, we observe that Jesus was concerned for the man’s reintegration into his own community: “Go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them.” Jesus wanted the leper to have his honor restored among his own family and friends. This restoration could proceed if the proper cleansing rituals were observed as prescribed in Leviticus 14.

In the light of Leviticus, this short account of Jesus healing the leper implies a complex world of boundaries, regulations and rituals for God’s people. The Hebrews had various mental maps regarding the holy, the clean, and the unclean (deSilva 2000). They are: maps of people, maps of space, maps of time, dietary regulations, and maps of the body. In this article we consider only maps of people.

⁴ The concept of “transmitting holiness” is contained in Ezekiel: “And he said to me, ‘This is the place where the priests shall boil the guilt offering and the sin offering, and where they shall bake the grain offering, in order not to bring them out into the outer court and so *transmit holiness* to the people’” (Ez 46:20, cf Ez 44:19, emphasis mine).

⁵ The fact that Jesus remained pure and untainted even though he touched or was in the presence of an unclean person is also clearly seen in other Gospel stories. For example: Jesus visits the house of Simon the Leper (Mat 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9); Jesus restores a woman with a discharge of blood (Mat 9:18–26, Mark 5:21–34, Luke 8:40–56); Jesus raises to life a girl who was dead (Mat 9:18–19, 23–26, Mark 5:21–24, 35–43, Luke 8:40–42, 49–56); Jesus heals a demon-possessed man who lived “among the tombs” (Mat 8:28–34, Mark 5:1–20, Luke 8:26–39).

Maps of people: The spectrum ranged from the high priest at the highest level of honor, purity and acceptance—to the priests, then the Levites, then the lay people of Israel, then the Jews of questionable lineage—down to the Gentiles at the lowest level of uncleanness, rejection, shame.

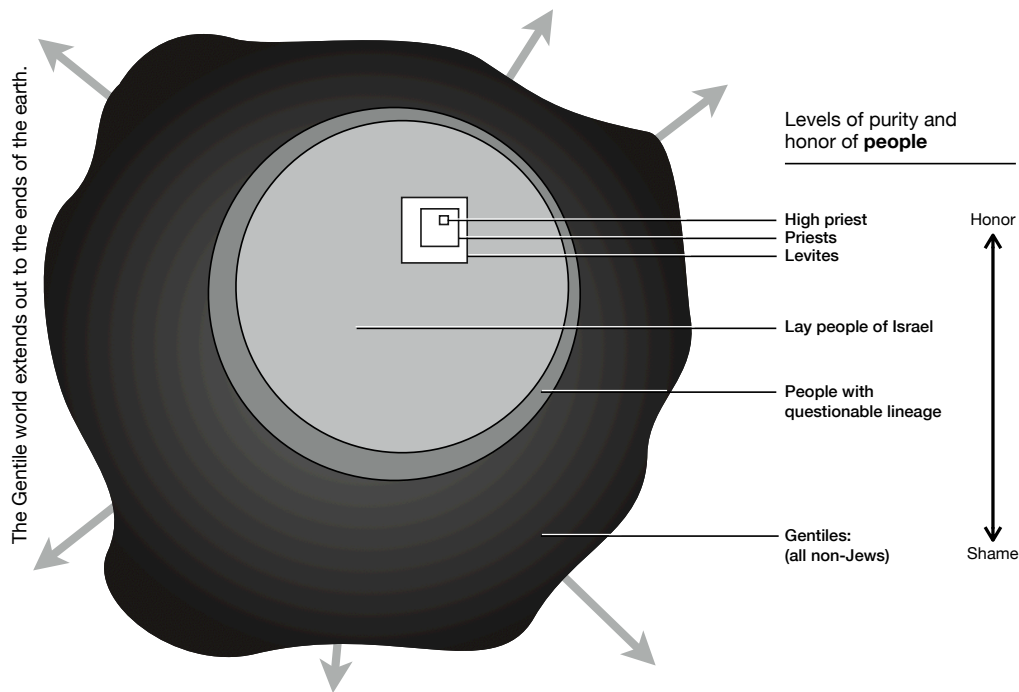


Figure 2: A conceptual “map of people” as understood by the ancient Hebrew world⁶

In Figure 2, the squares represent the Levitical priesthood. The circles represent the people of God, Israel. The squares connote ‘being inside of, yet separate, from the rest of Israel.’ The circular shape represents Israel’s ‘being inside of, yet separate, from the rest of the world.’ Israel was to be separate from the nondescript, amorphous, unclean world around them—the world of non-Jews, the Gentiles.

What’s the point?

Here are three main points concerning purity codes and and honor/shame:

- In the social world of God’s people, the Jews, in both Old and New Testaments, the laws and practices about purity and uncleanness corresponded to honor and shame.
- The observance of purity codes was required by God in order for his people to enter into, and remain in, fellowship with him.
- Jesus rewrote the purity maps by touching the leper and healing him. He violated the traditional purity codes by transcending them. Jesus introduced a new set of variables for determining what is common or holy, unclean or clean, outside the group or inside the group, shameful or honorable.⁷

⁶ Diagram extrapolated from deSilva, 256–257.

⁷ Please see the addendum, “Jesus stories involving various degrees of uncleanness/shame.” This chart examines the frequent occurrences in the Gospels which involve Jesus and the condition of uncleanness.

Purity language in the gospel message

The apostle John used purity language to describe how Christians can *enter into* and *remain in* fellowship with one another and with God. John explained that it is the blood of Jesus which has the power to cleanse God's people from their sins: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son *cleanses us* [emphasis added] from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to *cleanse us* [emphasis added] from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:7–9).

Jesus prayed to the Father for those who would believe, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). The process of sanctification—to be set apart in order to draw near to Almighty God—was redefined. Sanctification went from being primarily an *external* cleansing ritual—to primarily an *internal* cleansing with God's truth.

Perhaps the Bible's most extensive material about reconfiguring purity maps is contained in the letter to the Hebrews. Here is a short list:

- Reflecting the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, the atonement of Christ is summarized as "making *purification* [emphasis added] for sins" (1:3).
- The sacrifice of "the blood of goats and bulls" is contrasted with the far superior sacrifice of Jesus Christ as high priest—who offered his own blood to "*purify our conscience* [emphasis added] from dead works to serve the living God" (9:13–14).
- The cleansing power of the atonement of Christ touches that which is most internal—"our conscience." Even persons who are victims of the sins of other people and who live with persistent shame can be "cleansed from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9) through the atonement of Christ.⁸
- Believers are admonished to "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts *sprinkled clean* [emphasis added] from an evil conscience and our *bodies washed with pure water*" [emphasis added] (10:22).

Purity practices and ritual cleansing in major religions

Like Judaism and Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam also have purification rituals in their practice.

Purity in Buddhism: "Purity (suddha) is an important concept within much of ... Buddhism, although the implications of the resultant moral purification may be viewed differently in the varying traditions. The aim is to purify the personality of the Buddhist practitioner so that all moral and character defilements and defects ... such as anger, ignorance and lust are wiped away and Nirvana can be obtained."⁹

Purity in Hinduism: "An important part of ritual purification in Hinduism is the bathing of the entire body, particularly in rivers considered holy such as the Ganges; it is considered

⁸ This is especially important for people who experience "uncleanness" as a result of, for example, sexual abuse.

⁹ See "Purity in Buddhism," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purity_in_Buddhism>. Accessed 8 September 2013.

auspicious to perform this form of purification before any festival, and it is also practiced after the death of someone, in order to maintain purity.”¹⁰

Purity in Islam: The Qur'an says, “For Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean” (2:222). “Observing cleanliness of the soul, the clothes, and the surroundings is obligatory upon every Muslim, and this is considered as one of the pillars of Islam. ... Before offering prayers, it is necessary to perform [ritual purification]. ... If the body or clothes show traces of blood, pus, urine, feces, semen or alcohol, then [purification] becomes essential. ... The Quran says: None shall touch it but those who are clean (56:79).”¹¹

Conclusion: A gospel of purity for Majority World peoples

Let's summarize. First, conditions of cleanness and uncleanness are deeply intertwined with the dynamics of honor and shame. Second, both the OT and NT have ample material about purity and cleansing; the NT sometimes uses purity language to describe the atonement of Jesus Christ and the life of the Christian community. Third, the great majority of unengaged and unreached peoples of the world are Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, all of whom have their own purity maps, codes, and practices. Fourth, since the cultural dynamics of purity and honor/shame are held in common by the Bible's cultures and many Majority World peoples, it represents a significant opportunity for contextualizing the gospel.

These four points lead to our conclusion: *It is strategic to communicate the gospel to oral-preference Majority World peoples using purity language from the Bible's stories, parables, principles and other material.*

The man who was full of leprosy pleaded, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” Using similar language, believers can share the good news of Jesus Christ. There are many Jesus stories by which to communicate the gospel of purity. The addendum, “Jesus stories involving various degrees of uncleanness/shame” cites 48 such examples in the Gospels. From these stories a strong bridge to the atonement of Christ can be built. When introducing the gospel, believers can ask, for example, *Can I tell you a story about God coming to earth to cover your shame, and to make you clean forever?*

In order to increase the effectiveness of cross-cultural ministry to oral-preference Majority World peoples, the Western legal framework for the gospel can be supplemented by the gospel of purity.

¹⁰ See “Ritual Purification,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ritual_purification>. Accessed 8 September 2013.

¹¹ See “Ritual Purity in Islam,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ritual_purity_in_Islam. Accessed 8 September 2103.

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APPENDIX

Jesus stories involving various degrees of uncleanness/shame

The chart below is a comprehensive overview of the occurrences in the Gospels involving Jesus and the condition of uncleanness/shame. The following notes explain the nomenclature of the chart:

- Number of Occurrences:** refers to the number of times the story or account appears in the Gospels. Those categories being counted are: whether the story involves men or women (sometimes it is both), whether Jesus touched or was touched in the story, and whether it is a case of “Primary” or “Secondary” uncleanness.
- Touch:** The number of stories in which Jesus is touched by, or touches, someone unclean is measured because uncleanness was often transferred by touch. The word *touch* or *touches* occurs 27 times in Leviticus, and each time it refers to the condition of being unclean versus clean.
- Male/Female:** The number of occurrences of stories involving men and/or women is differentiated because there were purity regulations for women which differed from men due to conditions such as childbirth and menstruation.
- Primary:** refers to uncleanness that would apply to all Jews according to the the Pentateuch.
- Secondary:** refers to Levitical priests according to Lev 21:16–23. God told Moses that priests could not enter the temple if they had physical deformities because they would “profane my sanctuaries” (v 23). So any Jews with disease or deformities knew they were of lesser “cleanness” (and correspondingly, lower honor-status) than someone of the priesthood.

PURITY STORIES INVOLVING JESUS	SCRIPTURE REFERENCE	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES						TYPE OF UNCLEANNESS / SHAME					
		MALE/FEMALE		TOUCH	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	LEPROSY	GENTILE	DEMONIC	DEATH	SEXUAL SIN	OTHER	
		M	F										
Scripture passages about Jesus interacting with the unclean/shamed													
Jesus cleanses a leper	• Matt 8:2–4 • Mark 1:40–44 • Luke 5:12–14	3	3		3	3	✓						
Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit	• Mark 1:21–28 • Luke 4:31–37	2	2			2			✓				
Jesus raises a widow's son from the dead	• Luke 7:1–17	1	1	1	1	1				✓			
Jesus forgives a sinful woman	• Luke 7:36–50	1		1	1	1					✓		
Jesus calls Levi and eats in his home with tax collectors and sinners	• Matt 9:9–17 • Mark 2:13–17 • Luke 5:27–32	3	3									✓ In a home with sinners	
Jesus restores a woman with a discharge of blood	• Matt 9:18–26 • Mark 5:21–34 • Luke 8:40–56	3		3	3	3						✓ Blood	
Jesus raises to life a girl who was dead	• Matt 9:18–19, 23–26 • Mark 5:21–24, 35–43 • Luke 8:40–42, 49–56	3		3	3	3				✓			
Jesus heals a demon-possessed Gentile man	• Matt 8:28–34 • Mark 5:1–20 • Luke 8:26–39	3	3			3		✓ "Other side" near pigs	✓ Legion: unclean spirit	✓ Lived among the tombs		✓ Naked	

		NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES						TYPE OF UNCLEANNESS / SHAME					
PURITY STORIES INVOLVING JESUS	SCRIPTURE REFERENCE	MALE/FEMALE		TOUCH	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	LEPROSY	GENTILE	DEMONIC	DEATH	SEXUAL SIN	OTHER	
		M	F										
Jesus and the woman of Samaria	• John 4:1-45	1	1		1			✓ Gentile blood			✓		
Jesus and the woman caught in adultery	• John 7:53-8:11	1	1			1					✓		
Jesus heal a paralytic	• Luke 5:17-26	1	1			1						✓ Paralyzed man	
Jesus heals a man with the withered hand	• Matt 12:9-14 • Mark 3:1-6 • Luke 6:6-11	3	3			1						✓ Withered hand	
Jesus heals the daughter of Canaanite woman	• Matt 15:21-28 • Mark 7:24-30	2		2		1		✓	✓				
Jesus heals a deaf man	• Mark 7:31-37	1	1		1	1						✓ Deafness	
Jesus heals a blind man	• Mark 8:22-26	1	1		1	1						✓ Blindness	
Jesus heals a boy with an unclean spirit	• Mark 9:14-29 • Matt 17:14-19 • Luke 9:37-44	3	3		3	3			✓ Unclean spirit	✓ Seemed dead		✓ Deaf/mute	
Jesus casts out a demon and teaches	• Luke 11:14-26	1	1			1			✓ Unclean spirit			✓ Mute	
Jesus heals a woman with a disabling spirit	• Luke 13:10-17	1		1	1	1			✓				
Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath	• Luke 14:1-6	1	1		1	1						✓ Dropsy	
Jesus cleanses ten lepers	• Luke 17:11-19	1	1			1	✓	✓ One was Samaritan					
Jesus heals two blind men	• Matt 20:29-34 • Mark 10:46-52 • Luke 18:35-43	3	3		3	3						✓ Blindness	
Jesus visits the house of Simon the Leper	• Matt 26:6-13 • Mark 14:3-9	2	2	2	2	2	✓						
Other Scripture passages involving Jesus and the subject of uncleanness/shame													

		NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES						TYPE OF UNCLEANNESS / SHAME					
PURITY STORIES INVOLVING JESUS	SCRIPTURE REFERENCE	MALE/FEMALE		TOUCH	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	LEPROSY	GENTILE	DEMONIC	DEATH	SEXUAL SIN	OTHER	
		M	F										
Jesus tells the parable of the Prodigal Son	• Luke 15:11-32	1	1	1		1		✓ Pigs part of the story			✓	✓ Dishonor against father	
Jesus teaches on what defiles a person	• Matt 15:10-20 • Mark 7:14-23	2				-						✓ Food or heart?	
Jesus' passion and crucifixion	• Matt 27:32-50 • Mark 15:16-37 • Luke 23:26-48 • John 19:16-30	4	4	4	4		✓ Atoning for all effects of the Fall (including disease)	✓ Interaction with Gentile soldiers, officials	✓ Confronts, conquers the world of the demonic	✓ Death in public setting, outside of city	✓ Atoning for all sin effects of the Fall (including sexual sins)	✓ Naked suffering in public	
TOTALS		48	34	15	28	28							

Summary and notes

1. **Total stories:** There are 48 stories in the Gospels involving Jesus and the condition of uncleanness/shame. Of these,
 - a. 28 are examples of Primary Uncleanness
 - b. 15 are examples of Secondary Uncleanness.
 - c. Two occurrences are examples of propositional teaching about uncleanness “what defiles a man” (Matt 15:10-20, Mark 7:14-3).
2. **Gender:**
 - a. 34 stories deal with men
 - b. 15 stories deal with women
 - c. Deviations
 - The story of Jesus visiting the house of Simon the Leper (Matt 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9) includes both men and women, so the occurrence of “2” is counted for both male and female.
 - Jesus’ teaching on what defiles a person (Matt 15:10-20; Mark 7:14-23) is gender neutral, thus it is not counted.
3. **Touch:** 28 stories involve Jesus touching or being touched by someone unclean. Of course, he himself did not become unclean through touch. Rather, Jesus’ healing purity was transferred to the ones who were previously unclean. They were made whole by Jesus.
4. **Christ the Shamed One.** The uncleanness and shame which Jesus endured in his Passion and crucifixion is represented in this chart *quantitatively* as an occurrence in the Gospels. It is not, of course, represented *qualitatively*. The uncleanness/shame which Christ endured may be considered of an infinite magnitude in order for him to atone for the sins of the world. An extensive study could be done on the variety of ways in which Christ endured and overcame uncleanness and shame through his incarnation and crucifixion.