Introduction

Mercy and Sacrifice

Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

—Matt 9:13

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1.

Imagine spitting into a Dixie cup. After doing so, how would you feel if you were asked to drink the contents of the cup?

Admittedly, this is a bizarre hypothetical and an odd way to start a book. For this, I apologize. But the Dixie cup hypothetical is really the best place to start, as it was the trigger, the key psychological insight, which culminated in the book you now have in your hands.

When I heard Paul Rozin, the world expert on the psychology of disgust and contamination, discuss his Dixie cup research I had been puzzling over the fragility of hospitality, the psychological obstacles to what Miroslav Volf calls "the will to embrace." Why do churches, ostensibly following a Messiah who broke bread with "tax collectors and sinners," so often retreat into practices of exclusion and the quarantine of gated communities? Why is it so difficult to create missional churches? In seeking answers to those questions I had been thinking a great deal about Jesus's response to the Pharisees in Matthew 9. In defending his ministry of table fellowship—eating with "tax collectors and sinners"—Jesus tells the Pharisees to go and learn what it means that God desires "mercy, not sacrifice."

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Why, I wondered, are mercy and sacrifice antagonistic in Matthew 9? Why is there a tension between mercy and sacrifice? Of course, this tension might only be apparent and situational, two virtues that just happened to come into conflict in this particular circumstance. But the more I pondered the biblical witness and the behavior of churches, the more convinced I became that the tensions and conflict were not accidental or situational. I concluded that there was something intrinsic to the relationship between mercy and sacrifice that inexorably and reliably brought them into conflict. Mercy and sacrifice, I suspected, were mirror images, two impulses pulling in different directions.

Despite these suspicions, I was having difficulty penetrating the dynamics that linked mercy and sacrifice and fueled the tension between them. Perhaps surprisingly, the Dixie cup hypothetical helped lead me forward. I concluded that a particular psychological dynamic—disgust psychology—was regulating the interplay between mercy and sacrifice. How so? Consider the peculiarities of the Dixie cup test. Few of us feel disgust swallowing the saliva within our mouths. We do it all the time. But the second the saliva is expelled from the body it becomes something foreign and alien. It is no longer saliva—it is *spit*. Consequently, although there seems to be little *physical* difference between swallowing the saliva in your mouth versus spiting it out and quickly drinking it, there is a vast *psychological* difference between the two acts. And disgust regulates the experience, marking the difference. We don't mind swallowing what is on the "inside." But we are disgusted by swallowing something that is "outside," even if that something was on the "inside" only a second ago.

In short, disgust is a boundary psychology. Disgust marks objects as exterior and alien. The second the saliva leaves the body and crosses the boundary of selfhood it is foul, it is "exterior," it is Other. And this, I realized, is the same psychological dynamic at the heart of the conflict in Matthew 9. Specifically, how are we to draw the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion in the life of the church? Sacrifice—the purity impulse—marks off a zone of holiness, admitting the "clean" and expelling the "unclean." Mercy, by contrast, crosses those purity boundaries. Mercy blurs the distinction, bringing clean and unclean into contact. Thus the tension. One impulse—holiness and purity—erects boundaries, while the other impulse—mercy and hospitality—

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crosses and ignores those boundaries. And it's very hard, and you don't have to be a rocket scientist to see this, to both erect a boundary and dismantle that boundary at the very same time. One has to choose. And as Jesus and the Pharisees make different choices in Matthew 9 there seems little by way of compromise. They stand on opposite sides of a psychological (clean versus unclean), social (inclusion versus exclusion), and theological (saints versus sinners) boundary.

In sum, the antagonism between mercy and sacrifice is *psychological* in nature. Our primitive understandings of both love and purity are regulated by psychological dynamics that are often incompatible. Take, for example, a popular recommendation from my childhood years. I was often told that I should "hate the sin, but love the sinner." Theologically, to my young mind (and, apparently, to the adults who shared it with me), this formulation seemed clear and straightforward. However, psychologically speaking, this recommendation was extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to put into practice. As any self-reflective person knows, empathy and moral outrage tend to function at cross-purposes. In fact, some religious communities resist empathy, as any softness toward or solidarity with "sinners" attenuates the moral fury the group can muster. Conversely, it is extraordinarily difficult to "love the sinner"—to respond to people tenderly, empathically, and mercifully—when you are full of moral anger over their behavior. Consider how many churches react to the homosexual community or to young women considering an abortion. How well do churches manage the balance between outrage and empathy in those cases? In short, theological or spiritual recommendations aimed at reconciling the competing demands of mercy and sacrifice might be psychological nonstarters. Spiritual formation efforts, while perfectly fine from a theological perspective, can flounder because the directives offered are psychologically naïve, incoherent, or impossible to put into practice.

In light of this situation, one goal of this book will be to examine the events in Matthew 9 from a psychological vantage point. The goal will not be to "psychoanalyze" the participants in the story but to understand the psychological tensions separating Jesus from the Pharisees, the same tensions we observe in churches who take different missional paths in the world. This will be the main plot of the story I have to tell. But there will be many surprising subplots as well.

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2.

The central argument of this book is that the psychology of disgust and contamination regulates how many Christians reason with and experience notions of holiness, atonement, and sin. In a related way, the psychology of disgust and contamination also regulates social boundaries and notions of hospitality within the church. We will examine how this facet of disgust—distancing oneself from the "unclean"—is clearly on display in the events of Matthew 9. Finally, we will also explore how disgust and contamination psychology affect our experience of the body and soul, with a particular focus on how disgust is implicated in the scandal of the Incarnation. All in all, by the time we reach the final chapter of this book I expect many readers will be surprised at how much of the Christian experience is regulated or influenced by the psychological dynamics of disgust and contamination.

But before proceeding I would like, here at the beginning, to offer an apology for the approach used in this book. Let me start with a confession: I am not a theologian or biblical scholar. I am an experimental psychologist. Although I think I've done my homework, theologically and exegetically speaking, at the end of the day this book leans heavily upon the discipline of psychology. But I want to be clear that this book isn't solely or even primarily intended for social scientists. This book is for the church and for those leading the church in thought, word, and deed. It is my hope that theologians, biblical scholars, church leaders, spiritual directors, and pastoral counselors will find great value (and freshness) in the psychological approach pursued in this book. But I am a bit worried as there is always the danger that an interdisciplinary approach could fall between the cracks of academic and professional specialization. To prevent that from happening let me articulate, for any who find this necessary, how I think psychology can facilitate theological and moral reflection in both the academy and the church.

First, I want to be clear that I don't think theology can be reduced to psychology. Any appeal to psychology in this book is not an attempt to "explain" religious belief or behavior. The interplay between theology and psychology is interactive and dynamic. Theology—good

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or bad—affects how we experience the world, psychologically speaking. And psychological factors can affect and constrain theological reflection. For example, William James noted that rationality has a phenomenological feel (he called it the "sentiment of rationality"). We experience feelings of "rightness" and "wrongness" as we engage in intellectual inquiry, theological or not. More, James noted how certain hypotheses and intellectual options feel either "hot" or "cold" to us, either "alive" or "dead." In short, as we engage in theological reflection certain ideas woo and tempt us. Others leave us cold or repulsed. I've seen friends of mine, theologians and biblical scholars, wrinkle their nose, as if I forced them to smell rotten meat, when I've floated an idea they disagreed with. Theology, one finds, is a deeply emotional and visceral activity.

The point in all this is that there is an affective, experiential, and psychological aspect to theological reflection. We are pulled toward certain theological systems and repelled, even repulsed, by others. To be clear, I am not making a strong Humean claim that theology is simply a slave of the passions; rather, I am putting forth the Jamesian claim that reason can't be wholly detached from sentiment. Reason and emotion, the neuroscientists now tell us, are intimately linked. They cannot be dislocated. Consequently, it is important to attend to the psychological side of theological reflection, to ask why certain beliefs, systems or creeds seem "hot" or "cold" to us.

The danger of refusing to reflect upon the psychological dynamics of faith and belief is that what we feel to be self evidently true, for psychological reasons, might be, upon inspection, highly questionable, intellectually or morally. Too often, as we all know, the "feeling of rightness" trumps sober reflection and moral discernment. Further, we are often unwilling to listen to others until we are, to some degree, psychologically open to persuasion. The Parable of the Sower comes to mind.

This worry is less acute in the academy and seminary where critical thinking is prized and practiced. Not that professionals are immune to the passions: even the most intelligent and critical among us can fail to dispassionately consider arguments when a long-held and cherished position is at stake. No one likes to admit they are wrong, particularly if one's career or intellectual legacy is at stake.

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But my deeper concern in this book is for the church, the people sitting in the pews. In the absence of advanced theological training or the daily immersion in critical give-and-take, the church will tend to drift toward theological positions that psychologically resonate, that "feel," intuitively speaking, true and right. Many of my theologian friends lament the quality of the theology they encounter in the church—in the pews, pulpits, prayers, songs, bulletin articles, and bible classes. They are appalled by the theological content of the top ten Christian bestsellers on Amazon. They are shocked, but they never ask the question the psychologist is trained to ask: what makes these theological beliefs so appealing? Why do they "feel right" to so many people? If we had good, solid answers to these questions we might be better positioned to educate and lead the church. This book attempts to provide one such analysis. It is an attempt to show how specific psychological dynamics make certain theological ideas more or less appealing. Unfortunately, as we will see, the psychological dynamics of disgust and contamination tend to pull us toward theological and moral dysfunction. To address this dysfunction we need to investigate the psychological pull, the magnetic attraction, of certain beliefs. The alternative is to simply throw up one's hands and lament, "How can people believe such rubbish?" when there are, in fact, answers to that question. Psychology, I think, can help uncover some of those answers.

I often use the following metaphor to explain to my students the relationship between psychology and theology. Consider the human sweet tooth. Humans, we know, crave fats and sugars. This is a universal feature of human psychology. Everybody loves fatty foods and sugar. Yet we know that a diet filled with sugar and fat is unhealthy, even dangerous. So we inhibit our sweet tooth. Moreover, we spend a great deal of effort investigating the optimal diet, the exact ratios of vitamins, vegetables, and dairy products. We even engage professionals, like signing up with WeightWatchers, to help us manage our sweet tooth.

But none of this eliminates the craving. The sweet tooth is always there, exerting a constant pull. And if we are not vigilant, that force tempts us back into an unhealthy diet.

Striving after good theology is similar to managing a sweet tooth. Psychological dynamics will always make certain theological

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systems more or less appealing. And yet psychologically appealing and intuitive theological systems are not always healthy. In short, these psychological dynamics function as a sweet tooth, a kind of cognitive temptation that pulls the intellectually lazy or unreflective (because we are busy folk with day jobs) into theological orbits that hamper the mission of the church. As with managing the sweet tooth, vigilance and care are needed to keep us on a healthy path.

This book is about a particular kind of sweet tooth. It is an analysis of how a certain psychological system, the system that regulates the emotion of disgust and the attributions of contamination, captures notions of holiness, morality, sin, salvation, and much, much more. And like the sweet tooth, when aspects of Christian life are "captured" and regulated by disgust psychology a variety of unhealthy outcomes emerge—from the Macbeth Effect, to scapegoating, to practices of exclusion, to a Gnostic flight from the body. This book walks through these unhealthy outcomes, showing how each is the product of a theological sweet tooth, one that cannot be escaped or eliminated, only monitored and resisted.

3.

Before we get started, an overview of the book.

To understand the unhealthy and pernicious consequences of disgust and contamination psychology in the life of the church we need to review the empirical literature concerning both disgust and contamination. Part 1—*Unclean*—is a primer on the psychology of disgust and contamination. It is a fascinating body of literature. Disgust is a surprising emotion. Beyond the emotion of disgust, Part 1 will also survey the literature concerning contamination. The two are intimately related as disgust is often triggered by an appraisal of contamination. If a hair in your soup triggers a judgment of contamination then the prospect of eating the soup is disgusting. The theological relevance of contamination psychology is that contamination appraisals are governed by a peculiar logic that is often characterized by what psychologists call "magical thinking." For example, the notion of contact is critical to judgments of contamination. Did the hair come into contact with my soup? In a similar way, the Pharisees were

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offended by the *contact* between Jesus and sinners in Matthew 9. To external observers it might seem strange that physical proximity or physical touch could "defile" a person. But contamination appraisals are governed by these seemingly illogical notions. The problem for the church comes when this "magical thinking" is allowed to affect how we think about hospitality or morality in the life of the church.

After the primer of disgust and contamination psychology in Part 1 we begin to survey the effects of disgust, theologically and ecclesially, across three different domains. Part 2—*Purity*—discusses how disgust psychology regulates aspects of the moral domain. As William Miller observes in his book *The Anatomy of Disgust*, "moral judgment seems almost to demand the idiom of disgust."[1] Within Christianity we'll examine how sin comes to be understood as pollution or defilement, the state of being "unclean." Given this view of sin, salvation, particularly soteriological metaphors based upon the Day of Atonement in the Hebrew Scriptures, is understood to be a washing, purification, or cleansing.

Beyond this general metaphor for sin and salvation, we will also examine how particular sin domains are uniquely regulated by purity metaphors (e.g., sexual "purity"). None of this would be particularly worrisome if it were not for the fact that disgust and contamination psychology structures the way these metaphors are used and experienced. Very often, due to the way psychology regulates purity categories, these metaphors can have noxious consequences. For example, as we will see, one feature of contamination psychology is the attribution of *permanence*. Once an object is deemed to be contaminated there is very little that can be done to rehabilitate the object. Consequently, sin categories that are psychologically structured by purity metaphors are experienced as "permanent" and are difficult if not impossible to rehabilitate. For sins of this nature, once purity is "lost" there is no going back. At least that is how we *experience* purity violations. Pastorally speaking, this may be why sexual sins, which are often uniquely structured by the purity metaphor in many churches, elicit more shame and guilt. In short, although a church might claim that all sins are "equal" (in their offensiveness to God), sins have different psychological experiences. This is largely due to the fact that

1. Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, xi.

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sin categories are regulated by different metaphors, each activating different psychological processes. Sins might indeed be equal, theologically speaking, but the *experience* of a given sin can be very, very different depending upon the psychology regulating the experience.

Part 3—*Hospitality*—examines the social functions of disgust. Disgust properties are frequently imputed to despised groups. As William Miller has observed, "Disgust and misanthropy seem to have an almost inevitable association."[2] We find people "disgusting" or "revolting." Social disgust is clearly on display in Matthew 9. We also see it in Peter's vision of "unclean" animals in Acts 10. The voice from heaven tells Peter that his objection to eating unclean animals is in error: "Do not call anything unclean that the Lord has made clean." The vision is ostensibly about the Jewish *purity* codes regarding foodstuffs. But the heart of the vision is *sociological*, the critique that the Jewish leaders of the church were not taking the gospel to the Gentiles. In short, disgust properties create sociological barriers and motivate acts of exclusion. In mild forms this exclusion is simple avoidance or contempt. In extreme forms the act of exclusion is genocidal.

Part 4—*Mortality*—examines the existential aspects of disgust. There are many disgust stimuli that have little to do with food, morality, or social exclusion. For example, corpses, gore, deformity, and bodily fluids are reliable disgust triggers. Researchers have noted that these stimuli share a common core: each functions as a mortality reminder. We are existentially unsettled by the fact that we have a physical body that bleeds, oozes, and defecates. We are shocked to find that we are vulnerable to injury, illness, and death. Historically speaking, the physical body has always been a source of scandal within the Christian tradition. The physical body is illicit, craven, pornographic. Such body-related disgust is found to serve an existential function: it enables us to repress our fears of death.

The fact that disgust helps to fend off or repress fears about death and our physical dependencies wouldn't be so worrisome if it were not for the fact that a denial of our need, vulnerability, and dependency hardens our hearts when we see need exhibited in others. We don't want to be reminded of such things. As Arthur C. McGill observes in his book *Death and Life: An American Theology*,

2. Ibid., xiv.

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Americans "devote themselves to expunging from their lives every appearance, every intimation of death . . . . All traces of weakness, debility, ugliness, and helplessness must be kept away from every part of a person's life."[3] We pretend, continues McGill, that "the lives we live are not essentially and intrinsically mortal."[4] Consequently, to protect this illusion—that death and decay are not at work in our lives—we hide our eyes from the old, sick, deformed, ugly, and needy. As McGill notes, we create institutions and structures that "compel all such people to be sequestered where we cannot see them."[5] The emotion of disgust prompts most of this activity, acting as an existential buffer. Disgust motivates us to avoid and push away reminders of vulnerability and death, in both others and ourselves. What is needed to combat this illusion is a church willing to embrace need, decay, and vulnerability. Such a church will share similarities with the liberal society Martha Nussbaum envisions in her book *Hiding from Humanity*:

> A society that acknowledges its own humanity, and neither hides us from it nor it from us; a society of citizens who admit that they are needy and vulnerable, and who discard the grandiose demands for omnipotence and completeness that have been at the heart of so much human misery, both public and private.[6]

In chapter after chapter we will encounter a common theme: although disgust has some positive aspects, its role and influence in the life of the church is deeply problematic. I've already highlighted a few of these problems. Given these problems we are led to ask, what are we to do with disgust in the life of the church? How are we, returning to Matthew 9, to keep sacrifice from trumping mercy? The final chapter of the book attempts, in a preliminary way, to answer these questions.

3. McGill, *Death and Life*, 26.
4. Ibid., 27.
5. Ibid., 19.
6. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 17.

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