

Matthew 15:1-20 – “Tradition vs. Truth”

Whenever the Shema prayer (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) was recited during a service at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe, half the congregation would stand up and the other half would remain seated. The half that was seated would yell at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing would yell at the ones sitting to stand up. The rabbi, as learned as he was in the Law and commentaries, didn't know what to do. His congregation suggested that he consult a housebound 98-year-old man, who was one of the original founders of their synagogue.

The rabbi hoped the elderly man would be able to tell him what the actual synagogue tradition was, so he went to the nursing home with a representative of each faction of the congregation. The one whose followers stood during Shema said to the old man, "Is the tradition to stand during this prayer?" The old man answered, "No, that is not our tradition."

The one whose followers sat asked, "Is the tradition to sit during Shema?" The old man answered, "No, that is not our tradition."

Then the rabbi said to the old man, "Please help us! The congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand." The old man interrupted, exclaiming, "THAT is our tradition!"

We're going to talk about traditions today. And traditions can be a helpful guide in needful things, but they can also be the death knell to life if it is no longer practical. It's been said, the 7 last words of a dying church are: "We never did it that way before."

So, let's take a look at some traditions that were brought into question here in Matthew 15.

1. A Traditional Religion Defiles – 15:1-9

15:1-2 - *Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, ² “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.”*

The scribes and Pharisees were representatives of the religious leaders.

- Scribes were experts in the law of Moses; interpreting it and passing it on to their disciples.

- Pharisees were the largest religious-political party during New Testament times. They were separatists and became very strict adherents to Old Testament laws and additional traditions.

Now this group is not coming to Jesus to learn from Him. They're coming to challenge Him. They've already determined among themselves that Jesus needs to be destroyed (Matthew 12:14).

- And they're so bent on this that they come all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee to confront Jesus. That's a long way! Jerusalem was the epicenter of Judaism.

So as the people see this official delegation making their way to Jesus, I'm sure everyone is getting ready for a showdown. People were just never comfortable around these religious big wigs as they were so harsh and condemning.

- This is sadly often the nature of legalism.

This group comes and questions Jesus, and more so His disciples about not washing their hands before eating.

- Now many of you parents are hearing this and saying, *'Come on, preach it. Nothing wrong with a good hand washing. No fault here!'*
- But it's not that the disciples were not washing up before a meal, it's that they weren't washing their hands in the prescribed manner according to their traditions.

You see, Rabbi's taught that in addition to the Mosaic Law, Moses received further instructions from God while on Mt. Sinai which were not written down. These were passed down orally from teacher to disciple over the centuries. These were various interpretations to the meaning of the law. Between 120-200 AD this oral tradition was finally written down and it is what's known as the Mishna. But for many today, these oral traditions hold even greater weight than the Scriptures themselves.

- Next to the Sabbath, there were more rules on washing than any other area of Jewish life.

What a good Jewish person would do to be ceremonially clean according to Barclay is:

"Before every meal, and between each of the courses, the hands had to be washed, and they had to be washed in a certain way. The hands, to begin with,

had to be free of any coating of sand or mortar or gravel or any such substance. The water for washing had to be kept in special large stone jars, so that it itself was clean in the ceremonial sense and so that it might be certain that it had been used for no other purpose, and that nothing had fallen into it or had been mixed with it. First, the hands were held with fingertips *pointing upwards*; water was poured over them and had to run at least down to the wrist; the minimum amount of water was one quarter of a log, which is equal to one and a half eggshells full of water. While the hands were still wet, each hand had to be cleansed with the fist of the other. This meant that at this stage the hands were wet with water; but that water was now unclean because it had touched unclean hands. So, next, the hands had to be held with fingertips pointing downwards and water had to be poured over them in such a way that it began at the wrists and ran off at the fingertips. After all that had been done, the hands were clean.

To fail to do this was in Jewish eyes not to be guilty of bad manners, not to be dirty in the health sense, but to be unclean in the sight of God.”¹

- These guys made the most obsessive-compulsive person look like they've been snacking on valium.

So the scribes and Pharisees are trying to uphold Jesus' disciples to a practise that went beyond the law.

But Jesus has some better questions for them...

15:3-6 - *He answered and said to them, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? ⁴ For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ ⁵ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God”—⁶ then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.*

Many of the religious leaders' interpretations of the law caused them at times to live contrary to the law. But they justified it because they were upholding their traditions.

Case in point, when it came to honoring father and mother, they ended up dishonoring them and justifying it through their tradition. How so?

¹ Barclay, W. (2001). *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark* (pp. 190–191). Saint Andrew Press.

- To honor your father and mother biblically was not just to respect them but to care for them too. Children were basically like the parents RRSP. It was the responsibility of the children to provide for their parents in their old age.
- But these religious people had a way of getting around this obligation. They would declare their money *Corban* (Mark 7:11), which meant it was a gift offered or dedicated to God. It was set aside for spiritual purposes, so now it could not be used for ordinary things like taking care of parents. Even though, the people making this vow could continue to benefit from this money. It was so completely corrupt and self-serving.
- They were causing the Word of God to be nullified, or ***of no effect***, by their traditions. These people missed out on the blessing of walking in obedience to God's Word.

Jesus said in **Mark 7:13**, '*And many such things you do.*' This was just the tip of the iceberg. So, Jesus reserves some strong rebuke for them.

15:7-9 - *Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ⁸ 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. ⁹ And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'* "

That word hypocrite means 'to play a part', to be an 'actor', a 'pretender'. This is exactly what many of these religious leaders were doing. They were putting on a whole charade of being Godly people, but they were not really interested in serving God or pleasing Him.

Jesus goes back to what Isaiah said and applies it to these Pharisees and scribes.

- Interestingly, there is debate today on the authenticity of the book of Isaiah. Because of its amazing accurate prophetic predictions, many said that it must have been written later and by someone other than Isaiah. Yet, Jesus refers to Isaiah as being the writer of the book, ending all debate.

These guys were ones that sounded religious. They sounded like the ones who were close to God. They put on a good show, but their hearts were far from God. God isn't interested in an outward demonstration of religion or piety; He wants our heart. We can do obedient things on the outside, but if our heart is not behind it, it's meaningless.

- A little boy had been struggling to listen to his parents and was fighting most of the day with them. Finally the dad said, you need to go sit down in your

room and have a time out. After a bit, the dad heard some noises from the boys room. The dad asked, “Are you still sitting down in there?” The boy answered back, “Yep, I’m still sitting, but I’m standing up on the inside of me!”

The Pharisees were paying lip service to God but it was meaningless because it wasn’t coming from a heart of genuine worship and honor. All of their worship was done in **vain**, which means it was fruitless, it accomplished nothing, it’s meaningless.

They took their passed down traditions and taught those as doctrine; doctrine that overrode the very true Scriptures. In so doing, they failed to live out what God desired most. All of their religiosity may have looked good on the outside, but it meant nothing to God without a true heart of devotion.

- We too need to be careful of holding the commandments of men as doctrine. It’s easy to allow traditions in church to become stumbling blocks for others. Let’s not be rigid in how we worship God, but let us be certain to be guided by the Word of God rather than man’s opinion and tradition.

2. False Teachers Defiles – 15:10-14

15:10-11 - *When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, “Hear and understand: ¹¹ Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.”*

People were very concerned with dietary laws and following these commands of men. They thought what they did or put into their body defiled them. But Jesus corrects this view and completely flips their legal system on its head. This is revolutionary stuff He’s saying here.

The dietary laws that were given to Israel were meant to not only be safeguards for their own well-being, but they were to set them apart as a nation. These were to be things that identified them among other nations as God’s people.

But Jesus comes along now and says that none of these foods defile you. You aren’t made clean by what you abstain from, and you aren’t defiled by what you eat.

- Now let’s be clear here, Jesus is speaking about a spiritual cleanliness here. This is what the religious leaders were putting emphasis on with their hand washing.

- There are obviously things that we can eat that aren't the wisest choice. And they may make you pay physically, but they're not going to make you less of a Christian if you eat of it.
- The point is, those foods don't have any ability to defile you spiritually.

I don't know about you, but I'm so glad we are free to eat what we want!

Romans 14:14, *"I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."*

1 Timothy 4:4, *"For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving;"*

1 Corinthians 8:8, *"But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse."*

Again, you're not going to be made more holy or spiritual by what you eat or don't eat. These outward things will not help in making you more clean and righteous.

15:12-14 - ***Then His disciples came and said to Him, "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?"¹³ But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.¹⁴ Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch."***

Mark's gospel lets us know that they moved into a house at this point and Jesus continues to minister to the disciples. But they bring a concern first to Jesus. They let Jesus know that the Pharisees were offended. I'm sure this didn't come as a surprise to Jesus.

- That's a good point to see. Jesus didn't try to sugar coat things or hold back out of fear of offending someone. He let the truth be told. I think we've at times become a culture that is so worried about offending people that we're afraid to say the things that need to be said. We should not back down from speaking truth. The cross is offensive to many, but we don't shy away from preaching the gospel with the cross at the center of it all.

Jesus essentially says, don't worry about them. They're not going to last. They've not been planted by the Heavenly Father. Just like the parable of the wheat and tares, they're going to exist together for a time, but the tares will be pulled up and taken away into judgment.

They're not going to last because they're not rooted in God. They are blind to the truth and unfortunately, they are leading others whose hearts are not open to the truth. And if the blind are showing the blind where to go, it's not going to end well. So, Jesus says leave them alone. They're so steeped in legalism that they will eventually destroy themselves.

3.A Corrupt Heart Defiles – 15:15-20

15:15-18 - *Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Explain this parable to us." 16 So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? 18 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man.*

This teaching was so new to orthodox Jews and the disciples themselves were lost. Peter thinks Jesus is speaking in another parable. But Jesus is just giving some plain truth that was just so new to them. And Peter steps up to ask for help in this (Jesus is going to have to give him another lesson on this in Acts 10:9-16 with the sheet coming down from heaven with all sorts of animals and creatures on it and Jesus lets him know that these have all been cleansed by God).

But for now, Jesus has to make this a little simpler for Peter and the disciples. Again, He lets them know that whatever goes in is processed, the body does its thing and that food gets eliminated.

But the things that go into your mouth don't make you pure or defiled. They don't even touch the heart. But the things that come out of the mouth proceed from the heart. And it is the things that come out of the heart that can defile a person. In case you're still missing it, Jesus gets more specific on this...

15:19-20 - *For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. 20 These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.*"

The issue is not washing of hands or outward cleanliness, it's inward purity – which is a matter of the heart.

It's out of the heart that flows the things that can defile us.

- ***Evil thoughts*** don't come from an environment that pushes us over the edge, they come from the heart.

- We don't look to murder someone because they upset us so much and led us into a rage. No, murder comes from the heart. Just as **adultery** does. Jesus laid these things out in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-30). He said if you have anger in your heart toward another it's like committing murder. Or if you lust toward another, it's as though you've committed adultery. God was showing that true righteousness doesn't come by an outward act, because our sin originates in the heart. We need a clean heart, we need the righteousness of Christ.
- Again, it's from the heart that flow these issues of sin such as **fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies**. Don't think your sin is a result of your upbringing or surroundings. It's a heart problem! It's not behavioral modification or psychology that we need, we need a spiritual heart transplant.

The Word of God places much emphasis on the heart:

Matthew 22:37, *"Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'"*

Romans 10:9–10, *"that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness..."*

Ephesians 6:5–6, *"Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart,"*

Philippians 4:6–7, *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; ⁷ and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."*

Colossians 3:15–16, *"And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."*

1 Timothy 1:5, *"Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,"*

Our Christian life in Christ is about the heart. But what do we do with a verse like **Jeremiah 17:9**, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"*

We have a solution in **Psalms 119:11**, *“Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You!”* We need to be people of the Word – get in it and get it in you! Jesus said we are made clean because of the Word He has spoken to us (John 15:3). We don’t have to roll over and say the heart is sinful. We need to say I’m going through heart surgery and being renewed in knowledge. Paul said, *“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day”* (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Keep being renewed in the Word every day and let it cleanse your heart and lead you in His holiness.