

Matthew 15:1 – 20

¹ Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ ³ And he answered and said to them, ‘Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’ ⁴ For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.’ ⁵ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,’ ⁶ he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ⁸ ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. ⁹ But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ ¹⁰ After Jesus called the crowd to him, he said to them, ‘Hear and understand. ¹¹ It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.’ ¹² Then the disciples came and said to him, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?’ ¹³ But he answered and said, ‘Every plant which my heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.’ ¹⁵ Peter said to him, ‘Explain the parable to us.’ ¹⁶ Jesus said, ‘Are you still lacking in understanding also? ¹⁷ Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated?’ ¹⁸ But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. ²⁰ These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.’

Cultural Background

- The Mosaic Law never asked the Jews to wash before every meal. That comes from the Pharisees’ innovation, which was defended by the idea that there was an ‘oral Torah’ that came along with the ‘written Torah’ of Moses (cf. Midrash *Pesikta Rabbati*). Jesus, however, asserts that the Torah prohibited anyone from adding or taking away from it (Dt.4:2 and 12:32), thus ‘you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition.’ Karaite Jews (who follow only the Hebrew Bible and not the ‘oral Torah’ of the Talmudist rabbis; Kara = ‘Hebrew Scriptures’) also quote Isaiah 29:13 (‘This people honors Me with their lips...’) frequently to defend their position.
- The Pharisees looked at Jerusalem and the Temple and said, ‘It’s corrupt because it’s been occupied by the Romans. So all the hyper cleanliness that the priests would have done in the Temple, we’re going to do out here.’ (Jacob Neusner, ‘Two Pictures of the Pharisees: Philosophical Circle or Eating Club?’ *Anglican Theological Review* 64 (1982): 525 – 38.)
- The Pharisees held that you could give wealth to the Temple or synagogue that you normally would have given your aging parents.

Questions

1. What's the difference between tradition and commandment?
 - a. What's the big deal with washing hands?
 - i. The Pharisees thought that you're internally clean by default, but external things make you unclean.
 - ii. This also resulted in the Pharisees not eating with other people who were less 'clean' ceremonially than them. Later, the question of Jews and Gentiles eating together would rock the Galatians.
 - iii. The Mosaic Law never asked the Jews to wash before every meal. That comes from the Pharisees' innovation. They looked at Jerusalem and the Temple and said, 'It's corrupt because it's been occupied by the Romans. So all the hyper cleanliness that the priests would have done in the Temple, we're going to do out here.'
 - b. Is Jesus changing the subject in v.4? Is it a non sequitur? No: He's illustrating a point about how tradition eclipses commandment. How many things did the Pharisees do wrong regarding honoring father and mother?
 - i. They invented a way to be stingy, and kill two birds with one stone: You could take the wealth that you normally would have given your aging parents, and instead, you could dedicate it to the Temple or synagogue.
 - ii. They greatly weakened the commandment to honor parents
 - iii. Put tradition above Scripture when the two were in conflict.
 - iv. Honored God with their lips (lip service) but taught false things (lip service)
 - v. Their heart was turned against God, as shown by what they said and taught and did. That's fundamentally why Jesus brings this up.
 - c. How do Christians observe human traditions more than God's commandments?
 - i. We make attendance at church Sunday service an indication of maturity while we make jokes that are gay-bashing or offensive to other people.
 - d. Why do we do that?
2. In our society, the heart is regarded as the source of love. How might Jesus comment on that idea? What is Jesus' point about the heart and uncleanness?
 - a. The heart is the source of defilement
 - b. The heart is the source of words. Notice the theme of speech running through this passage: speaks evil of father or mother (v.4), you say, 'Whoever says...' (v.5), with their lips (v.8), teaching as doctrines the precepts of men (v.9), what proceeds out of the mouth (v.11), the things that proceed out of the mouth (v.18).
 - c. The basic conflict here between Jesus and the Pharisees is the direction of defilement. Does it come from the outside? Or from the inside?
3. Why is it easy to not see uncleanness in our own hearts?
 - a. Because it's fun to complain about other people, and everyone does it.
 - b. Because friendships are often built on saying something negative about other people: slander, gossip. It's as if you're building a coalition and someone else is made to be a common enemy.
 - c. Application: Count how many times negative thoughts or words, especially about other people, come into our minds or pass through our lips.
 - d. Jesus wants us to regard that evil part of our hearts to be the common enemy.
4. What's Jesus' point about the Jewish Law in v.19? Notice that he lists part or all of the Ten Commandments, depending on how we interpret 'evil thoughts'. If 'evil thoughts' have to do with sin against God, then the others (murder, adultery, etc.) are the sins against other people. The order is the same general order as in the Ten Commandments.
 - a. Standards and laws are not a basis for making yourself feel good or comparing yourself to other people.
 - b. They are mirrors to show us something inside ourselves: Our hearts need transformation.
5. So why is it easy to focus on traditions rather than God's commandments?
 - a. Traditions tend to be centered around a gathering place: Temple or synagogue (or church service). Consider tithing – it's not actually biblical; it was an Old Testament practice that involved feasting with God, the poor, the alien, and the Levite; in the New Testament, all wealth belongs to God.
 - b. Traditions tend to be oversimplifications of the commandments

'The fall of man: Man was created in the image of God. The disobedience of our forefathers darkened that image of God in man, and therefore, having lost his communion with God, man was separated from the source of life and perfection. As a result of this fall, man came under the dominion of sin and death. However, the fall of man did not entirely destroy the image of God within him, and thus, even in the life of sin, the love of God still acts within the human being, creating in his soul a nostalgia for the life for which our All-Good God created him. And this nostalgia is the source of the human need and search for God and the holy. From a psychological standpoint, we may say that man is ill, suffering because of his alienation from the ontological road which God set out for him. The symptoms of his illness are sin and his inclination towards things—with the aid of the Devil and the evil spirits, who resent the image of God which persists even in sinful men and women—that damage his soul and which even more greatly darken the image of God within him.' (In Honor of St. Gregory Palamas: A Sermon Delivered by Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna in the Lecture Hall at Synod Headquarters, Kolonos (Athens), Greece, on the Second Sunday of Great Lent, the Feast Day of St. Gregory Palamas. Found at http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/phronema/ac_stgregorypalamas.aspx)