

Week of January 27, 2013

Tradition or God's Word?

Focal Scripture Passages:

1. **Follow Scripture** (Matt. 15:1-6)
2. **Avoid Hypocrisy** (Matt. 15:7-9)
3. **Clean Your Heart** (Matt. 15:10-11,17-20)

What This Lesson Is About:

Superficial Christianity based on outward conformity to rules and tradition is the enemy of true faith. This lesson focuses on Jesus' question to the Jewish religious leaders, "Why do you break God's commandment because of your tradition?" (Matt. 15:3).

1. Follow Scripture (Matt. 15:1-6)

Matthew 15 opens with a confrontation between some Jewish leaders and Jesus over a specific religious tradition. Matthew documented earlier confrontations (9:1-8,32-34; 12:1-8,10-14,22-37) and later ones (16:1-4; 19:1-12; 21:14-16,23-27;22:15-22,23-33,34-40,41-46) even before Jesus' arrest. On this occasion these leaders were **Pharisees** (religious laymen with great influence on the everyday lives of the Jewish people) **and scribes** (scholars or legal experts who favored the Pharisees' viewpoint in the interpretations of the Mosaic law and in their emphasis on ancient traditions). Sadducees had their own scribes who favored the priestly interpretations. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court on political and religious affairs, consisted mainly of Sadducees with a strong minority of Pharisees in Jesus' time. The numerous confrontations between these Jewish leaders and Jesus recorded in the four Gospels show they believed Jesus' teachings were heretical and undermined the very foundation of religious life established by God. Our focal passage contains one such example.

An article on "The Pharisees" is located in the Heavy Preparation Packet.

These Jewish leaders had a major problem with Jesus' views on hand washing: "**Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they don't wash their hands when they eat!**" Every child learns to wash hands before eating, whether in the ancient world or in modern times. But this is not what is at stake in this argument. Many Jewish traditions began with something in the Mosaic law, then attempted to make it relevant in Jewish life, but in doing so they went beyond what Moses intended. Here the issue is ritualism rather than hygiene (see Mark 7:3) since it was likely based on washings required of priests in the Mosaic law.

These ritualistic washings were then applied to the common people before eating meals, despite the fact Moses required no such ritual hand washing. And it didn't stop there. Mark explained to his Gentile readers that these washings applied to other things as well: "there are many other customs they have received and keep, like the washing of cups, jugs, copper utensils, and dining couches" (v. 4). This is the power and danger of **the tradition of the elders** (see at the end the background study on "Tradition of the Elders") or other traditions in Christianity today—such traditions demand we do things God does not demand, and proponents of traditions condemn those who refuse to do these things even though God does not condemn them.

Three articles are included "The Tradition of the Elders," "The Tradition of the Elders" and "Ritual Washings of First-Century Palestine" in the Heavy Preparation Packet.

Jesus answered their question with one of His own, a strategy He used on several occasions. People often use this strategy in an attempt to mislead or to draw attention to something else. But Jesus did so to focus on what was really important: **He answered them, "And why do you break God's commandment because of your tradition?"** These Jewish leaders had found a legal loophole around honoring one's parents. Jesus' question is another way of asking, "Which is more important: a ritualistic washing of hands or the Fourth Commandment?"

The answer is painfully obvious, but these religious leaders couldn't see it. They could justify breaking the Fifth Commandment if it served their purposes, but they were quick to condemn those who didn't **wash their hands** ritually like the elders of old had taught.

To make sure these Jewish leaders knew to what He referred, Jesus quoted the Fourth Commandment and the law that called for the death penalty of anyone who broke it: **“For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘The one who speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death’”** (see Ex. 20:12; Lev. 20:9). Notice how much stronger Jesus' wording is when compared to our wording of the Fourth Commandment. This is how seriously God took the Fourth Commandment: when Israel ruled itself through the Mosaic law. Those who violated the commandment were to be stoned, and it even applied to a child still living under his parents' authority (see Deut. 21:18-21).

But honoring one's parents often proved financially undesirable, especially for the wealthy who cared more about their money than their parents' welfare. The **tradition of the elders** provided an escape, or loophole for those who resisted supporting their parents in financial need. It is this tradition Jesus condemned: **“But you say, ‘Whoever tells his father or mother, ‘Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a gift committed to the temple’—he does not have to honor his father.’”** Mark's Gospel records Jesus' use of the Hebrew term “Corban” (Mark 7:11), which means “gift” and was the technical term that not only referred to this tradition but was originally used in the Old Testament to describe things dedicated to God thus prohibited from any other purpose. This gift (such as a piece of land, money or whatever), though dedicated to the temple, did not have to be paid during the lifetime of the owner; it just had to be verbally promised to the temple, thus keeping the gift safely in the hands of the owner for his personal use instead of being used to help his parents. The remaining value would then revert to the temple upon the owner's death, keeping the owner's parents from ever benefiting from it. Jesus' view of this Corban law was that it essentially gave wealthy Jews permission to disobey the Fourth Commandment: **“he does not have to honor his father.”** Thus the **tradition of the elders** allowed the wealthy to withhold honor from their parents but condemned people for not ritually washing their hands before a meal. Such is the nature of legalism.

Jesus saw this as tantamount to putting human tradition over God's revealed will: **“In this way, you have revoked God's word because of your tradition.”** Few things are more dangerous for the church than to develop teachings and rituals that those who profess Christ consider more important than Scripture. True, they would never put it in these terms, but their actions betray them. For example take segregation in the 1960's and 70's. Even churches were segregated—white people attended “white churches” and black people attended “black churches.” When school desegregation occurred, some saw an opportunity to desegregate churches too. But the vast majority resisted this move vehemently. It did not matter that there is “no Jew or Greek” (nor white or black!) since “you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28); it did not matter that Christ “is our peace, who made both groups [Jews and Greeks, and yes, blacks and whites!] one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14); it did not matter we are called to share the gospel with all people (Matt. 28:19-20). What mattered at the time was that the tradition of segregation continue, and God's Word became irrelevant. Believers, especially church leaders, need to guard against such traditions in churches today.

2. Avoid Hypocrisy (Matt. 15:7-9)

Jesus did not hesitate to condemn the Jewish leaders for revoking God's word in favor of their traditions. He called them **“Hypocrites!”** The Greek term originally referred to an actor in the theater but eventually took on the meaning of someone play acting in real life—a person pretending to be something or someone he was not. The Jewish leaders pretended to be so pious and religiously upright, but they cared more for traditions than for God's Word.

Jesus saw a parallel between these hypocrites and those Isaiah condemned eight centuries earlier who professed worship but sought deliverance by other nations (see Isa. 29:13): **“Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said: ‘These people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. They**

worship Me in vain, teaching as doctrines the commands of men.’ ” Christians need to guard constantly against the tendency toward complacency and indifference about our relationship with God. We may think we honor God in the many “religious” things we do, but He looks at our hearts and sees when we are just going through the motions. Worship can become mere habit, and our rituals often replace the teachings of God’s Word.

3. Clean Your Heart (Matt. 15:10-11,17-20)

Jesus focused attention on the real problem. It is neither the failure to wash one’s hands a certain way, nor plucking a bit of grain on the Sabbath, nor chewing gum in the church building, nor playing musical instruments during a worship service. No, the real problem is much more condemning than any of those—in fact, none of those are condemning at all! It is our corrupt human nature. In a word, it is sin. Jesus wanted to make sure everyone listening understood. He summoned **the crowd** and said, **“It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.”** Or, the food we eat does not condemn us; the words we speak do so.

By saying this, Jesus showed that following the dietary law (see Lev. 11) did not commend a person to God unless it was accompanied by faith and a desire to be holy because God is holy (vv. 44-45). Unclean food itself did not condemn a person. Jesus pronounced dietary law would no longer be in force for God’s people (see Mark 7:19b; Rom. 14:14; 1 Tim. 4:3-5). What foods we eat and whether we ritually wash our hands before eating—these are the things legalism is made of. Such an emphasis on rituals and rules promotes pride in self and condemnation of others.

But Jesus did not stop there. The sinful things people say have a root cause: the human heart. Just as God looks on the heart (see 1 Sam. 16:7), so did Jesus. He traced wicked human words to a wicked human heart. Food goes **into the stomach and is eventually eliminated** through the digestive system. **“But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this defiles a man.”** The inherent sinful hearts bring defilement. Jeremiah anticipated Jesus’ words: “The heart is more deceitful than anything else, and incurable—who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9).

To show just how wicked and deceitful the human heart is, Jesus listed human sins that originate in the heart: **“For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies.”** And this is only a sample—an exhaustive list would never end! Coming full circle in His debate with the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus returned to the original point: **“These are the things that defile a man”**—those things that come from the human heart—**“but eating with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”** Jesus refused to give even the smallest credence to man-made rituals in which the legalists took such great pride. Instead, Jesus condemned them for ignoring God’s commands and for teaching people to follow their rules instead of God’s. Jesus alone, not following traditions, can make our hearts pure.

One can only imagine the stunned faces of the Pharisees and scribes as they heard Jesus’ scorching words condemn their rituals—rituals that had become the proper way of life for the pious and godly, at least in their estimation. When a legalist is rebuked for his legalism, his reaction will normally be one of three things: (1) to respond in anger and become more determined to continue in his legalism; (i.e. "I'm going to a different church.") (2) to ignore the rebuke and not consider whether the rebuke is valid; (i.e. "I'll do it anyway.") or (3) to recognize that his legalistic ideas are unbiblical and to change his behavior. (i.e. "Repent and seek to give God glory.") Clearly, Jesus desires the third response from us. Are there any religious rules, rituals, or regulations you follow that need to be tested in light of God’s Word? Ask God to help you examine your life through the teachings of His Word so you can live according to His will rather than man-made ideas.

Background Study: "Tradition of the Elders" (v. 2)

The Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus why His disciples did not adhere to “the tradition of the elders” (Matt. 15:2), referring to the oral teachings of rabbis passed down for centuries. These traditions originated after the

Babylonian captivity, between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. Jewish leaders believed that the Jewish people needed detailed religious instruction, so they began interpreting the Mosaic law and applying its teachings to their daily situations. Their teachings on the Mosaic law (that is, the law code or the Sinai covenant) were passed down orally and interpreted it in a way they believed would protect the people from disobeying God. Examples of rabbinical teachings among many thousands include the following: (1) on the Sabbath, medical aid could not be given to a person who was not in danger of death; and (2) a man could divorce his wife for something as mundane as a bad breakfast. The issue Jesus faced about washing hands was of the same order in that none of these were addressed in the Mosaic law, but they were condemned by Jewish tradition.