

Author H. G. Wells is famous for his science fiction novels. He is the author of *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man*, and *The War of the Worlds*. ... But a lesser known work of his... is a short story called "The Country of the Blind."

It's about an inaccessible... luxurious valley in Ecuador where... due to a strange disease... everyone is blind. ... After 15 generations of this blindness... there was no recollection of sight... or color... or the outside world at all. ... But one day... a man from the outside (a man who could see)... literally fell into their midst. ... He had fallen off a high cliff and survived... only to stumble into their forgotten country.

When he realized that everyone else was blind... he remembered the old adage: "*In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.*" Wells writes:

He tried at first on several occasions to tell them of sight. "*Look here, you people,*" he said. "*There are things you do not understand in me.*" Once or twice... one or two of them attended to him; they sat with faces downcast and ears turned intelligently towards him... and he did his best to tell them what it was to see.

But they never believed him. They thought he was crazy.

The man fell in love with a girl there and the girl's father... Yacob, went to talk to a doctor about him. A conversation ensued:

[The doctor said]: "*I think I may say with reasonable certainty that, in order to cure him complete, all that we need to do is a simple and easy surgical operation—namely, to remove these irritant bodies [his eyes!].*"

"*And then he will be sane?*" [Yacob asked].

"*Then he will be perfectly sane, and a quite admirable citizen.*"

"*Thank Heaven for science!*" said old Yacob.

Wells goes on to point out that the man would not be allowed to marry Yacob's daughter... unless he submitted to an operation that would blind him.

So what did the man do? Wells writes:

He had fully meant to go to a lonely place where the meadows were beautiful with white narcissus... and there remain until the hour of his sacrifice should come... but as he walked he lifted up his eyes and saw the morning... the morning like an angel in golden armor... marching down the steeps...

It seemed to him that before this splendor... he and this blind world in the valley... and his love and all... were no more than a pit of sin. And the man who could see... escaped the country of the blind with his life.

That is where you and I live — in the country of the blind... that is proud of its science... sure of its health... oblivious to the light. ... It is not only pitiful; it is deadly. .. Jesus said, "*Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.*"

It is one thing to be blind physically. (We all are blind to a certain extent.) There are truths about me... that others see... but I am totally unaware. (My wife and daughter would be shouting "AMEN!" if this was a charismatic

church.) ... But there are some truths about you... that others see... and you don't. We call them "blind spots" and each of us have them.

But it is quite another thing to be blind spiritually. The disciples had spiritual blind spots. They couldn't perfectly see who Jesus was... and understand what He was doing. ... But overall... they could see... and their sight... as the life of Jesus unfolded before their eyes... sharpened and broadened.

The scribes and Pharisees... on the other-hand... were completely blind spiritually. ... And it's not just that they were blind... but they were attempting to lead other blind people. In one of the verses that we come to this morning in our study through Matthew's Gospel Jesus says this about them...

Matthew 15:14 (ESV)

... they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

Today... we will see that there are three common characteristics of spiritual blindness. ... Here in Matthew chapter fifteen... we will look at these characteristics... observing the nature and the effects of spiritual blindness.

We will do so for two reasons. ... First... so we might recognize them as false teachers - and to not follow their lead. ... Second... so we might correct... if necessary... our own vision. I have very little doubt – that even our finest evangelical theologians... have spiritual blind spots here and there. Recognizing these common characteristics can help us root any out of our life.

So... here is the first characteristic of spiritual blindness — then (in the days of Jesus)... and now (in our day).

#1. The Spiritually Blind Ask the Wrong Spiritual Questions

Matthew 15:1-2

I'm sorry... but this is a stupid question. Has your teacher in school ever told you that there is no such thing as a stupid question...? It is not true. We just found one.

What had just happened... that we saw in last week's passage...? What came just before that question here in Matthew chapter 15...?

As we saw in the last two chapters... we have Jesus' look-at-me-I'm-God-in-the-flesh miracles — the feeding of the 5,000 and the walking on the sea. Those two miracles scream to us... "This must be God!" ...And that's what the disciples on the boat finally saw. The previous chapter's miracle centers on Jesus' claim... "Don't fear; I AM is here," and it ends and culminates with the disciples' adoration and confession, with worship and then those words, "*Truly you are the Son of God*" (14:33).

So before the scribes and Pharisees ask their question... we have the disciples' eyes widening to the person of Jesus through the miracles of Jesus. ... But we also have a group from Gennesaret and how they react to Jesus. Look again with me at the final three verses of chapter 14...

Matthew 14:34-36

What is significant about this seemingly insignificant summary section?

Two things are significant. First, Gennesaret is no Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the religious center of the Jewish world. (In verse one of chapter 15) It's where these important Jewish religious leaders come from. ... The fact that the scribes and Pharisees united in this attack... and came all the way from Jerusalem to speak to Jesus... indicates the seriousness of their purpose. It is likely that this committee represented the leaders of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. ... But the people of Gennesaret (on the other hand) are not your big-city... well-educated... important and uppity sophisticates!

Second... look how this town responds to Jesus. The verbs tell the story. "And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent around to all that region and brought to him all who were sick and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it [just the fringe!] were made well" (14:35, 36).

That's the context. That's what comes before the scribes and Pharisees' question. Jesus is a man who can feed thousands of people with five loaves and two fishes. Jesus is a man who can walk on water and calm the sea. Jesus is a man who has such power that if you just touch the fringe of his garment in faith you can be cured of any physical ailment. Completely cured! ... So what kind of a question should you ask such a man? How about "Who are you?" How about "What must I do to follow you?"

But what do they ask? They ask nothing about Jesus. Instead they ask, "*Why do your disciples [not even Jesus] break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat*". My school teachers were

wrong! There really is such a thing as a stupid question. At best... it is the wrong question.

I like what Kent Hughes says about it's inappropriateness.

“It’s like a reporter asking a firefighter just after he has rescued a baby from a burning building, “Now, sir, I’ve heard that your brother eats meat on Fridays during Lent. Is that true?” What? Meat? Lent? My brother? What kind of a question is that? Considering all Jesus has done and taught, they could have (should have) come up with a better question than that.”

Spiritually blind people—then and now—are always asking the wrong questions.

Have you ever had this happen to you? You’re sharing the gospel with someone... it seemed as though they were listening quite intently. But once you finished... they open their mouth and ask a question from completely out in left field... It has nothing to do with the death and resurrection of Christ... sin and forgiveness... Heaven and Hell. ... They don’t ask, “*Is it true that Jesus rose from the dead?*” or “*How can I be sure that what you’ve shared with me is true?*” ... Instead they want to know if Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. They want to know if you’re a Donald Trump supporter. They want to know if you think we evolved from monkeys.

When people find out that I am a pastor... a frequent question that I get asked is... “*So... how many Bibles do you own?*” ... Perhaps... just as often is... “*So... what do you do all week... when it isn’t Sunday?*” - Ouch! Now that one hurts!

The spiritually blind ask the wrong questions. They don't even need to ask it out-loud. One of the most damaging questions they might ask... they ask of themselves. In fact... it drives them. They ask: "How can I push my agenda through?" "How do I get the church to do what I want it to do?" ... The spiritually blind are consumed with THEIR own wants and desires – and they don't even stop to see if it is Christ's agenda for the church.

The scribes and Pharisees come all the way from Jerusalem. They are on some top-level official business. They have heard and seen Jesus. ... His agenda was not their own. Jesus and His disciples did not seem to respect what THEY thought was important. Jesus and His disciples did not seem to respect tradition – the way these visitors thought they should. So they come to ask Jesus about His disciples and their new eating habits.

#2 The Spiritually Blind Elevate Tradition and Diminish Scripture

The spiritually blind trust in un-Scriptural traditions.

We are about to pick back up in Matthew 15... with verse 3... but before we return to our passage... let me first make clear... that I am certain that Jesus knew where these men are coming from with their question. ... He knew that they were not like our moms... concerned about those 5,000 people eating fish and bread – without washing their hands first. (We've all heard our moms ask us – with a look of scorn... "Did you wash your hands?" ... But this was not like that. ... They were not trying to protect Israel from poor hygiene. ... He knew that this was an issue of ritual purity.

The issue at stake was the ceremonial cleansing. Uncleanness was contracted by touching or eating what was regarded as unclean. For

instance... a woman was unclean during her monthly period... and after any time she had given birth to a baby. ...A dead body was unclean. ...A Gentile was unclean. ...Certain animals were unclean.

Now...This uncleanness was contagious. ... If a man touched something unclean... he became unclean. ... If someone touched him... they became unclean... and so it would spread. This meant that one might unwittingly become unclean by touching someone on the street who was unclean without being aware of it. ... To combat this possibility... an elaborate system of washings had been worked out and become mandatory.

The water was first poured on both hands... held with the fingers pointed upwards... and must run up the arm as far as the wrist. It must drop off from the wrist... for the water was now itself unclean... having touched the unclean hands... and if it ran down the finger again... it would again render the fingers unclean. The process was repeated with the hands held in the opposite direction... with the fingers pointed down; and then finally each hand was cleansed by being rubbed with the fist of the other. ... A really strict Jew would do this... not only before a meal... but also between each of the courses.

The question asked Jesus is why His disciples break with this tradition of the elders and do not wash their hands in this way before eating. Jesus' reply is to speak about the nature of true cleanliness.

It was bad enough that Jesus and His disciples mingled with outcasts... but they did not even seek to be purified! Of course... in making this accusation... these religious leaders were forcing Jesus to deal with the

very *foundation* of their religious faith. If Jesus rejected the sacred traditions of the nation... then He was a heretic!

Where did these traditions come from? ... From the days of Ezra... the Jews had begun to amass explanations and traditions... that they added to the law and regarded as more important than the law. They claimed that the additions had been delivered orally by Moses and handed down from generation to generation. ...This so-called oral law was already voluminous... In time it would become as large as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and be known as the Talmud with its Mishna and Gemara. It was written and edited around 200 years before Christ... by Rabbi Judah haNasi.

These traditions came to be seen as authoritative... and began to trump the law itself. ... Some considered it to be worse to disobey these teachings of the elders... than it was to disobey the commands of the law.

"It is a greater offense to teach anything contrary to the voice of the Rabbis, than to contradict Scripture itself," says the Mishnah. ... Rabbi Eleazer said, *"He who expounds the Scriptures in opposition to the tradition has no share in the world to come."*

This background helps us understand Jesus' response. When these religious leaders questioned Him about keeping their traditions. We will see Jesus turn the tables on them... and ask them why *they* were breaking the commandments of God... for the sake of their traditions... as if to say...

"You're one to talk!"

Matthew 15:3-9

The Lord countered the accusation of the Pharisees with a challenge. They asked Him a question; He asked them a question. "*And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?*"

NOTICE the word "your" in verse three – YOUR TRADITION. (He does this again in verse 6... "*for the sake of YOUR tradition you have made void the word of God...*") ... The Lord was denying their claim that Jewish tradition went back to God's mighty prophet (Moses)... when He bluntly called it *their* tradition. ... Jesus clearly distinguished the differences between human traditions and God's commandments.

The practices and customs of the ancestors had not only become equal to God's law... but in this case had supplanted it. By displacing the law... the religious leadership had broken God's commandments.

The Lord referred the Pharisees to the fifth commandment of the Ten Commandments: "Honor thy father and mother."

Exodus 20:12 (ESV)

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

Honoring them means providing for their physical needs where necessary. Children must always honor and respect their parents, reflecting the proper attitude that must be demonstrated toward this God-ordained role of authority. This was so important in God's eyes that anyone who disobeyed the command was to be put to death.

Exodus 21:17 (ESV)

"Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

The rabbis... however... had come up with an evasion of the demands of the law (Matthew 15:5-6). To get out of this obligation a Jew simply had to say the word "Corban" over all that he possessed. The word meant that he had dedicated his possessions to God. He could vow for instance that upon his death... whatever he owned... what was left over... would go to the temple. ... That vow absolved him from the present duty of helping his parents. He had put his material possessions under a sacred umbrella... so to speak... and the claim of the fifth commandment was superseded by the vow. ... Until the time of his death... he could use his material means... any way that he desired... for his own personal enjoyment.

What made this particularly corrupt was the wealth that the temple leadership gained at the expense of the aging parents. There was nothing admirable in this. Not only were the parents denied the honor that was due them, but the child was actually stealing from his parents and the leadership was endorsing the use of this legal loophole.

Thus, the commandment of God was nullified by the maneuverings of men. They had found a way to circumvent the clear teaching of the law. As a result, God's Word had no authority in the Jewish community. The pattern that had been designed by God for the care of aging parents had been thwarted by the religious leadership of God's people. The Jewish religious hierarchy had done so for the sole purpose of acquiring that wealth for themselves through their religious institution. They had robbed God of his authority and the elderly of their rightful care.

Jesus made it clear that the scribes and Pharisees had allowed human traditions to nullify God's word. ... Three times in Jesus' answer He

charges them with supplanting the Scriptures. In verse 3 He says, “*you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition.*” In verse 6 he says, “*So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.*” ... Finally in verse 9... He speaks of them as “*teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*” Jesus accuses them of gagging God’s voice with the tattered rag of their traditions. ... He says... in essence... that the spiritually blind elevate tradition and diminish Scripture.

Unfortunately, there are many "evangelical traditions" in churches today, man-made teachings that are often considered as authoritative as the Word of God. ... When I first started out in ministry church tradition struggled against using guitars and drums during a worship service. It did not matter that young people were attracted to Christ through it... “That is not the way we do it around here...” was the end of the matter for many believers.

Several years ago... we saw the practicality of giving our pews away to a church in Oklahoma... and purchasing chairs... so we could use our auditorium for more ministry events. Some people held to the tradition that a church must have pews... their tradition was more important than outreach.

Among evangelical churches today... I see that there are three basic types of churches... and it has to do with tradition... verses Scripture.

Church Type #1. Highly regards both Scripture and Traditions (expressed by their methods for doing ministry.) Their doctrines are firm (unchangeable)... and so are their methods (these never change either.) The way things were done 40 years ago... are the way we will do them

today. If I were to label church type #1 – it would be “fundamentalist,” because these churches usually refer to themselves that way.

Church Type #2. Has a minimal regard for scripture and a minimal regard for tradition and methods for doing ministry. These churches are willing to try anything... if they think it will grow their church. Doctrine is not that important. Have the people stop bringing their Bibles to church... because it might offend non-believers... who they are trying to reach. Sermons are not expository from the Bible. They are feel good messages. The sky is the limit in terms of methods they will use to get people into the church. The only key they look at is – will it fill our sanctuary?

Church Type #3. Has a high regard for Scripture and a minimal regard for tradition. They are willing to try different ways to build the Kingdom of God and are not limiting themselves by those who might say, “That isn’t the way we’ve done it before...” Doctrine is firm and unchangeable... but methodology is not firm and unchangeable.

Evangelist George Whitfield helped start the 1st Great Awakening in America. It was a time of such powerful spiritual awakening... that every corner of society was affected. ... But because Whitfield preached outdoors... where he could hold massive evangelistic meetings... the formal church rejected him as a heretic. His method was wrong! Church meetings are to be held inside buildings.

The elders and I see our church as this third type... and are committed to helping it stay that way. I believe it fits what Christ is teaching here in our

passage. God's word is authoritative – not tradition (or methodology.) Our doctrine and beliefs will remain FIRM... but our methods flexible.

#1. The Spiritually Blind Ask the Wrong Spiritual Questions

#2 The Spiritually Blind Elevate Tradition and Diminish Scripture

The Lord was not through. He followed up His challenge with a quotation from Isaiah 29:13. The Pharisees said that their tradition was weightier than Scripture... but the Lord authoritatively referred them to Scripture and bluntly called them hypocrites in verses 7-9.

The quotation was particularly appropriate... as the tradition the visitors from Jerusalem were so concerned about... only dated back to the time of Ezra and the Babylonian captivity. ... But Isaiah of course prophesied long before the Babylonian captivity... long before the days of Ezra and the scribes... long before the beginning of the system of traditional teaching that in the end produced the Talmud.

Isaiah and Jesus both dealt with the hypocritical human traditions that set aside the authority of God's word and resulted in empty worship.

#3. The Spiritually Blind Don't See That Spiritual Defilement Is a Matter of the Heart

Matthew 15:10-20

The spiritually blind don't see that spiritual defilement is first, foremost, and foundationally a matter of the heart.

In verse 10 (and following) our Lord calls the crowd and gives His own Shema, “Hear and understand.” He says, “[I]t is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth [which comes out of the heart - this defiles a person.]”

Jesus pointed out that the Pharisees were so blind that they could not see defilement is a matter of the heart. ... Because of this blindness... they could only lead their converts into the ditch.

When Jesus’ disciples showed how they were afraid of the repercussions... because Jesus had offended these important men from Jerusalem... in Matthew 23:16... Jesus called them "blind guides"—quite a graphic description. ... In essence Jesus said: “*Why be afraid of rootless plants that God did not plant. They are dying... and blind guides... who cannot see where they are going?*”

It was Jesus’ counsel that the disciples ignore the Pharisees and scribes or leave them alone. “*Never mind them!*” ... I believe that Jesus regarded their opposition as so hardened... that He alluded to the parable of the weeds... that He had just told. Those weeds are to be left alone until harvest.

It was imperative that the crowd understand what Jesus was saying. The scribes and Pharisees were destined for destruction by the holy God. Following them or imitating their patterns of religious behavior would result in the same fate and destination. Thus Jesus literally advised that they be ignored. They had nothing to say that had the approval of the God (Whom they claimed to worship.) ... Anyone who would blindly follow their

leadership and instruction or cower at their criticism would fall into the pit with them.

Jesus actually gives another parable here... “The Parable of the Mouth” ... It teaches that we are not clean enough on the inside to be right with God through washing our hands before we eat. ... Put differently... clean hands are not the mediator between God and man. - Jesus is!

In verse 20 Jesus explained the Parable of the Mouth to His disciples... who could not quite grasp it. Jesus was teaching something so radical – it went against everything they had been taught all their lives... about dietary laws... and their importance. ... So He slows down and explains.

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.

“Let’s look at the human heart,” Jesus says in essence. *“Now, what do we see? It is beating but diseased.”* The human heart is indeed diseased. We all suffer from heart disease. Our heart pumps evil through our arteries—go ahead and hate, go ahead and lust, go ahead and curse and covet and lie and steal.

I am going to be as blunt... as what I think Jesus is saying here, “The filth of the [toilet] is ***not*** nearly as disgusting as that of a human heart – *that has not yet been cleansed*”.

As your pastor, I might ask - “*How’s your heart?*” And you might say, “*How do I know?*” How do you know what’s in your heart? ... Easy... just look at what comes out of your mouth: “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart” (v. 18).

We all know that how you talk to (and about) your spouse tells you (and everyone in earshot) about the quality of your marriage. The same is true of father-son... boss-employee... pastor-congregation relationships. The same is true of every relationship. Our words speak volumes. Our words are the window to our hearts.

Do you want to know how your heart is...? Take a look at your most recent conversations. Were they filled with grace and mercy...? Or have you been overly harsh... grumbling... griping... gossiping... putting others down...?

How clean is your heart? It’s as clean as your tongue. Words are the toxin of today. Our bad words show our bad hearts.

Through the Holy Spirit we need Jesus to give us broken and contrite hearts (Psalm 51:17)... circumcised hearts (Romans 2:29)... clean hearts (Hebrews 10:22)... pure hearts (1 Peter 1:22)... new hearts (Ezekiel 36:26).

Yes, “The filth of the [toilet] is not as disgusting as that of a human heart *that has not yet been cleansed.*” But Christ—His righteousness... His purity... His perfectly clean hands and head and heart — dwelling in our hearts through faith changes everything. What can cure a sin-diseased heart? Faith. Faith in Jesus. What can wash away all those unclean words?

Faith. Faith in Jesus. Faith in Christ and him crucified... dying upon the cross for all our sins — the blasphemies... the backtalk... every careless thought and deed and *word*.

The scribes and the Pharisees were blind to this. They were blind to Jesus. That's why they asked the wrong question... trusted in their un-Scriptural traditions... and thought purity was just an outside... not an inside deal.

So how's your heart? How's your mouth? How's your sight? Are you seeing as you should see? Or are you blind?