

Matthew 15:1-20 – “Scripture & Tradition” – Dec. 17, 2023

1. Christ and the disciples have had their difficult night at sea, and crossed over to Gennesaret where many were healed by touching Christ’s robe
 - a. Like the children of Israel departing Egypt in a hurry and being saved at sea by God, Christ, the true Israel and His disciples depart Bethsaida in a hurry and re-enact a similar salvation-at-sea story as we saw last week
 - b. Remember that the volatility was coming from several angles
 - i. Romans – Herod Antipas’ paranoia of John the Baptist
 - ii. Jewish – the people desiring to make Christ a political ruler
 - c. This last point of tension has got Israel in a buzz, and now that word has gone through the land, Christ and the disciples get visitors
2. VV.1-2 – *“Then 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.”*
 - a. These aren’t just any visitors, but the top-ranking Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem
 - b. This is the top guys from the denominational headquarters coming to check up on a church discipline situation
 - c. The Pharisees were not priests; they were businessmen who were wealthy enough to own books and have cultural influence
 - i. In today’s setting, they wouldn’t necessarily be pastors, but would be more like the wealthy businessmen in the church who could ensure that the elders operate according to his wishes

- d. The scribes were those dedicated to copying and studying the Scriptures, so this is a pretty significant delegation that has come north from Jerusalem
 - e. They start their examination of Jesus immediately, why they are breaking the tradition of the elders, which was to wash their hands before they ate
 - i. The law of Moses did have many different kind of washing and cleansing ceremonies in it, especially for the priests
 - ii. But there was actually no law requiring people to wash hands at every meal
 - iii. Washing at mealtime is certainly permissible, and even commendable, but it was not a matter of being God's Word
 - iv. Rather, what the Pharisees were pressing Jesus on was a tradition in the oral law (*Mishnah*)
 - 1. Because of the nature of legalism and of the human heart, our man-made traditions frequently get elevated above the actual law of God
3. VV.3-6 – *“He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ 5 But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” 6 he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.”*
- a. I enjoy teaching apologetics

- i. Particularly, I like to use an approach called ‘presuppositional apologetics’ which refuses to treat people like they are neutral and will become convinced with adequate evidence or reasoning – such a view of man is contrary to Scripture
 - ii. I believe that the presuppositional approach is “weapons-grade” apologetics because it goes all the way down to the foundation – it exposes our assumptions or presuppositions about reality
 - 1. How do you know what you know? How do you test it? By what standard?
- b. Jesus frequently uses this approach – rather than accept the assumptions of His opponents and then trying to make some minor adjustments, He pulls the bottom out from under them
 - i. He refuses to accept their assumptions or play by their rules
 - ii. He confronts them with the fact that they are not bending the knee to the Lord
- c. Instead of making excuses or apologies for why His disciples didn’t wash their hands, He shows the superiority of God’s law
- d. “*Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition*” is a pretty pointed question – Christ has asserted His authority and has instantly moved the Pharisees from playing offense to playing defense
- e. In this particular instance, Jesus confronts them with a practice that is called “*Corban*” (Mark 7:11)

- f. In this arrangement, a man would pledge his wealth to the temple, and so whatever he didn't use for himself in his life was an inheritance to the temple
 - i. This means that to give his money to someone else was to break his vow
 - ii. It is so easy to see how self-serving this is, because the way one used their money in their own lifestyle wouldn't need to change – it just offered a pious way out of being generous to other people
 - iii. the religious leaders allowed this vow as an excuse to get one out from providing for their elderly parents
- g. to a large degree, a person's wealth is their children
 - i. this is still the case today that children are a blessing and an inheritance from the Lord
 - ii. in older societies that relied on agriculture and manual labour, a man's wealth was very much connected to his children and grandchildren
 - iii. the way God has designed the family to work is that a young couple devotes their most fertile, strong, and energetic years to their small children
 - 1. these children grow and take more responsibility for themselves as the parents get older and have less energy
 - 2. eventually they go out and establish their own families, and the parents, who are generally still relatively young and healthy are freed up to pay more attention to their aging parents who need increasing help as they move their way to the finish line

3. this is the wisdom of God in the covenant home and the covenant family
- iv. it was this way from creation, and the law of Moses explains the principle
- v. in v.4, Christ quotes the Fifth Commandment from Exodus 20:12
 1. this commandment promises a blessing for obedience - long life in the land
 2. one way of honouring father and mother is to care for them in their sunset years,
- vi. Christ goes on and quotes a case-law application of the Fifth Commandment, from Exodus 21:17, which states that whoever reviles their father and mother must die
- h. So notice the logic of this exchange
 - i. The Pharisees and scribes come walking in and complain about Christ and the disciples disregarding the Fifth Commandment because they're not washing their hands before eating
 - ii. Jesus points out that the general rule about hand washing was an oral tradition and not in the actual law, and then He uses their arbitrary standard against them
 1. *"You pretend to be so concerned about us honouring our elders, but we're not actually violating anything in Moses' law, and yet you are the ones that give people an exception to Moses law if they make a pledge to the temple that ends up costing them nothing. You are giving people a pass on something that God says should*

be a capital crime, and then you're getting on our case for the kind of sin which isn't even a sin. What's wrong with you people?!"

2. What these people have done is elevating a non-biblical oral tradition above the actual words of Scripture, and they are so blind to their tradition that they accuse Jesus, thinking that they are in the right
 - a. The most audacious thing about pride and self-righteousness is that there is a pattern that the people who are the most proud and complacent actually have the least reason to be proud and complacent?
 - b. It's like blindness sets in and a person loses all sense of proportion or self-awareness
 - c. Yet people do this all the time. They criticize others for the very thing which is an obvious problem in their life:
 - i. Men on their 4th woman being deeply concerned about patriarchy and how us Christians treat our women
 - ii. Feminists pull out their Handmaid Tale stories about patriarchy, and yet in the world they've created, men in sodomite relationships are renting the wombs of women so they can pretend to have a family. The women have very literally become nothing more than reproductive organs on legs.

- iii. Unbelievers make fun of us for trusting the Bible
because they think it's a book written by men, yet
they seem to believe whatever the New York Times
or the CBC tells them to believe
 - d. In the church there is no short supply of this either
 - i. Think of how many “sins” there have been that are
nowhere mentioned in the Bible that have become
very important for people, yet often these same
people gossip and slander and are given to fits of
anger
 - 1. Cards/neck ties
 - 2. Makeup/earrings
 - 3. 3rd or 4th level customs re: Sabbath
 - 4. Lawful use of alcohol
 - 5. Spurgeon cigar story w/students
 - a. Critical minister who was obese
 - i. Christ is not happy to make His point and leave it there.
 - i. He buries the knife a little deeper and then gives it a good strong turn
- 4. VV.7-9 – *“You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 8 ‘‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 9 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’’*
 - a. Jesus calls them hypocrites – meaning that they fail even by their own standards

- b. They made a superficial appeal to Scripture and Jesus shows them that the “sin” which bothered them so much wasn’t even in the Bible, and worse yet, actual sins that the Bible actually condemns seem to get a pass from them
- c. This is an almost word for word quote from Isaiah 29:13, but it also echoes elements from Ezekiel 33:31 – *“And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain.”*
- d. Jesus is painting a picture of religious people who know how to go through the motions and even talk a good game, but they trust their own instincts and traditions more than the Word of God
- e. So is Christ teaching that tradition is bad?
 - i. I don’t believe so
 - ii. Scripture talks about tradition in a positive light just as well as in a negative light
 - 1. 1 Corinthians 11:2 – *“Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.”*
 - 2. 2 Thessalonians 2:15 – *“So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.”*
 - 3. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 – *“Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any*

brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”

iii. So how do we hold this together?

1. Tradition is inevitable
2. We must have customs for life to work
3. The key is to be thoughtful and intentional about our customs
 - a. Are they explained and understood to help us better understand and obey the Word of God?
 - b. Are they mere rituals that we do without thinking?
 - c. Worse yet, are they habits that keep us from the Word of God?
4. All of the above are possible, and we all have to recognize that we have traditions. There is no person more blind to his tradition than the man who thinks he has none.
 - a. This person is especially difficult because he can't be corrected by Scripture – because he thinks he has no tradition, he merely assumes that his views are Scriptural, and therefore they can't be examined or corrected
5. One of the things that I love most about this church is that we are not all from one culture or one tradition
 - a. We have various flavours of ethnic and church backgrounds, which provides us with a wonderful opportunity to learn about church history, about various

practices and traditions, and most importantly, to lay them all down at the feet of King Jesus

- b. Some traditions are probably left in the past, some are useful but need to be explained, and some are absolutely necessary for our spiritual health
 - i. Imagine the chaos of every copy of the Bible having its books ordered differently. While each book is Scripture, Scripture doesn't say what order they need to be in, but we need to know where to go!
 - ii. Imagine if one Sunday we didn't pray at all, or read any Scripture, or would have a 10 minute devotional sermon or a 2 hour academic lecture, or we'd make half the people stand and half sit, or we had no set start time
 - iii. The Bible doesn't tell us a precise practice for these things, but the fact that we have customs and traditional practices and a predictable liturgy, based on the covenant renewal patterns of Scripture is good for us
 - 1. C.S. Lewis – liturgy is a “comfortable slipper”

- 2. People who think liturgy is dry and dusty
 - also have a liturgy – they just haven’t thought it through
 - a. It’s always a four song sandwich
 - with a sermon or devotional in the middle
- 6. As a church, we are also very intentional about subscribing to the ancient creeds of the early church, and we have a historic confession from the Reformation era as our statement of faith
 - a. Is this tradition in the positive or negative sense?
 - b. Positive if it’s understood, negative if we don’t understand how these things serve Scripture
 - c. Creeds and confessions aren’t meant to stand above Scripture, but to summarize is accurately so we don’t start inventing novel interpretations which will eventually become the unbiblical traditions of the future
 - i. The “tradition” of rejecting tradition is itself a particular kind of tradition
 - ii. The unbiblical traditions of the Pharisees got there as people gradually pulled away from the tradition of Moses and invented their own beliefs
 - iii. This invariably happens if we are not watchful and intentional

1. Our ideas always start to eclipse the biblical faith because our own ideas always seem newer and fresher and more exciting than the ancient paths laid out by Scripture
2. E.G. – “listening prayer is the most important form of prayer” sermon
3. Appeal to creeds or confessions ahead of Scripture
4. Roman Catholic Tradition vs. Protestant tradition vs. Radical anti-tradition
- iv. So traditions are good insofar as they are understood and explained, and are clearly designed to serve Scripture instead of stand over them
- v. *“Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And it is traditionalism which gives tradition such a bad name.”* – Pelikan
- f. Are we all careful to make distinctions between what is actually God’s Word and what are the commandments of men?
 - i. Sometimes human wisdom may even be helpful, but we cannot treat it as binding
 - ii. Pauls’ instructions re: circumcision were very different for Timothy (contextual/weaker brother) than for Titus (legalistic demands)
5. VV.10-14 – *“And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the*

mouth; this defiles a person.” 12 Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” 13 He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides.³ And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

- a. This whole controversy was kicked off about washing and food laws, and now Jesus explains what is behind all of this
- b. He is clear that food and drink are just that – food and drink
 - i. *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”* – Romans 14:17
- c. The Pharisees and scribes were so consumed with externals that they failed to understand the principles that the Law was designed to teach
 - i. “they knew everything about the law, except for what it meant”
 - ii. This is common today in far too much preaching, where we invert the design of Scripture
 - 1. Personal illustrations help us to grasp a principle in order that we may better understand and get swept up into the biblical drama
 - 2. Too often, the biblical text is used as a jumping off point to get us swept up into the drama of our own lives (e.g. – start with David and Goliath as the jumping off point to get us deeper into ourselves)
 - iii. The food and the cleansing laws of the old covenant were terminated because they were not an end in themselves but were designed to teach separation and holiness.

1. Properly understood, they were pointed at the heart of man, to show that the godly operate differently than the pagans around them
 2. So the food or the customs themselves won't make a person dirty, and this is especially true in the case of a man-made tradition that wasn't even part of the old covenant
- d. In v. 12, the disciples seem concerned about the fact that the Pharisees were offended by Christ, and notice how Christ doesn't go on an apology tour
- i. *"I don't know where my inconsiderate remarks came from. That's not who I am..."*
 - ii. Rather, He points back to His parable of the wheat and the tares (13:24-30)
 - iii. He is comparing the Pharisees to the tares in the field
 1. These are not true believers. An enemy has planted them in the field of God's world, and rather than pulling them up prematurely and uprooting good wheat, just let them alone (v.14). God will uproot them at the appropriate time
 2. Both will fall into a pit – the false teachers who led their followers astray, and the undiscerning followers who gave these false teachers a hearing
 3. Both are headed towards the destruction they deserve
6. VV.15-20 – *"But Peter said to him, 'Explain the parable to us.' 16 And he said, 'Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the*

mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”

- a. Perhaps Peter has been so surrounded by these extra-biblical customs that he failed to see the difference between the man-made custom and the biblical law
- b. He’s so confused that he asks for this parable to be explained, but this isn’t really a parable – it’s a pretty straightforward and easy-to-understand teaching
- c. Nevertheless, Jesus explains it further
 - i. Meat and bread and hand washing are just meat and bread and hand washing
 - ii. They are just things which can be used to the glory of God just as well as for the corruption of sin
 - iii. The dividing line here is not about stuff – it’s about the heart
- d. Food and drink goes into the mouth and through the body and becomes excrement. That’s it. Food and drink can’t touch your heart.
- e. But what comes out of the mouth comes straight from the heart. Whatever the heart is full of comes out in the form of words, behaviours, actions, etc.
 - i. The heart is what defiles a person. To make friends with sin defiles a person. To set God’s law aside defiles a person. To walk in externals while feeding sin in your heart defiles a person.
 - ii. “*The heart of the matter is the matter of the human heart*” – Lawson
- f. The Pharisees were legalists

- i. They were men who tied up heavy burdens for people, and these burdens were heavy because they were external keeping of man-made rules that didn't even make any sense
- g. It is tempting to think that legalism is the error of taking God's law too seriously
 - i. How can we take God's law too seriously? If it's God's Word, we absolutely must treat it with utmost seriousness
 - ii. The problem with legalism is that it doesn't take God's law seriously enough
 - 1. It either assumes we can gain entrance into the kingdom by law keeping, which lowers the bar of the law so low as to assume we could pull it off
 - 2. Or it reduces God's law by confusing it with petty man-made rules
 - a. The fruit of this is frequently that a generation who has grown up with man-made rules that were treated like God's law never learn to make distinctions and they run to the opposite error of antinomianism
 - i. Cameras & motorcycles being confused with actual instructions about gender & sexuality & church order
 - ii. I think this is what has happened in much of evangelical culture

1. Shallow theology used to take the shape of
petty rules, and now it takes the shape of
trivial worship and lawless living
- h. Jesus' next move is an absolute stroke of genius
 - i. Notice how He doesn't say any form of "*God's law is tough. Just try your best and God will look the other way. After all, it's not such a big deal. We all mess up and get a do-over.*"
 - ii. Because Christ came to fulfill the law, and not to abolish it, grace must be free, but it can never become cheap
- i. The Pharisees started this confrontation with a man-made rule that they tied to the Fifth Commandment
 - i. They tried unsuccessfully to condemn Christ because He wasn't doing anything contrary to the Fifth Commandment
 - ii. He goes on offense and shows them that their case against Him is unscriptural, and not only that, but they actually are guilty of breaking the spirit and the letter of this law with their corban customs, which were also man-made
- j. As if to say, "*alright, let's have a contest over the law*", Jesus now shows them the corruption of their own hearts
 - i. Out of the heart comes every kind of evil thought, not just breaking the Fifth Commandment, but also
 1. Murder (6th)
 2. Adultery and sexual immorality (7th)

3. Theft (8th)
4. False witness and slander (9th)
 - ii. Christ acquits Himself of their slander, and then proves them guilty where they started and works His way down the list of ways they are violating the actual law of Moses, which is not going anywhere
 1. The actual law of God is fixed and unmoving, so we find it is actually not so much that we break God's law, but that it is us who break when we smash against this law
- k. Jesus has played the Ten Commandments challenge perfectly
 - l. These things defile a person
 - i. The problem isn't with external stuff, so we go inside to make more rules to save ourselves
 - ii. The inside of man is the very thing that needs saving, and the Law shows us this truth
- m. Remember the story of Uzzah and the Ark, Uzzah made the grave error of stabilizing the ark that he wasn't supposed to touch, and God struck him dead
 - i. Dirt is just dirt, so the ark falling to the ground wouldn't have been a problem
 - ii. But a sinful hand touching God's holy ark is a big problem – Uzzah was a sinner, far dirtier than the ground
- n. Now Jesus says He doesn't really care about the excrement that comes out of your body

- i. It's not at all dirty compared to the excrement that comes out of your mouth
- o. The sewage tank of the digestive system is nothing compared to the sewage tank of the unregenerated human heart
 - i. That's the excrement which defiles
 - ii. That's the sewage system that needs to be dealt with
 - iii. And our petty little rules about don't touch and don't taste can't begin to get down there
 - iv. The only way to clean this dirtiness is for there to be a complete heart transplant
 - 1. External rule keeping will not do
 - 2. Legalism comes from inside of us and addresses nothing
 - 3. The gospel comes from outside of us, transforms everything, and then addresses everything that comes back out of our mouth and our fingertips
- v. John Newton – *“A minister's hands are strengthened when he can point to his people as living proofs of the doctrine he preaches.”*
- vi. Is the root of the matter in you?
 - 1. Are you careening between the ditches of legalism and antinomianism, making shipwreck of everything?
 - 2. Or have you received a new heart, so that Jesus is transforming everything that is flowing out of that new heart?

7. CHARGE

- a. *What starts as an aggressive examination of Jesus quickly turns into a trial of the emptiness of man-made religion. Not only has Jesus easily acquitted Himself of all wrong, but He has turned the tables and concluded a devastating case against the Pharisees. The standard of righteousness is not our own rules and ideas, no matter how new and exciting and compelling they seem, but the unchanging Word of God. The actual Law of God has weighed the human heart and found it wanting. The excrement that comes out of our hearts is far more putrid than the excrement produced by what goes through the stomach. As we grow in grace, the charge is to be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2). The renewal of the mind roots us in the eternal truths of God's Word, and the transformation of our lives is made evident by the fruit of our lives, and by the new things which come out of our mouths.*

8. BENEDICTION

- a. 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24 – “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”