

Matthew 14:34-15:9

Introduction

Matthew 14:34-36 is the third of four passages where Matthew gives a summary of Jesus' healing ministry. We have already talked in the first two passages (4:23-25; 8:16-17), as well as in many other places, about the true significance and *meaning* of Jesus' miracles of healing. We have asked the question: What do Jesus' miracles of healing tell us about the *nature* of the King and the *nature* of His Kingdom? So for the meaning and significance of these verses in Matthew 14 I refer you back to our studies of Matthew 4:23-25 and 8:16-17. We will consider the special significance of these verses in this specific context when we come to the fourth and last healing summary in chapter fifteen (15:29-31).

I. Matthew 15:1 – Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said...

Notice that these Pharisees and scribes are from Jerusalem. These are the big time religious “heavy weights”, and they have traveled all the way from Jerusalem to confront Jesus. This is not the first time that Jesus has encountered Pharisees from Jerusalem (cf. Mark 3:22), but it is the first time that *Matthew* has pointed this out to us. So for Matthew, this seems to be another indicator and sign that the final conflict is coming. Jesus did not come only to teach and to heal. All the way back in Matthew 1:21, the angel Gabriel said that Jesus would *save* His people from their *sins*. So far, Matthew still has not breathed a word of *how* Jesus will accomplish this salvation. And yet we begin to see the signs.

II. Matthew 15:1-2 – Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.”

Now, of course, the Pharisees are not talking about hygiene. They're talking about ritual purity in light of the Old Testament law. According to God's law, there were certain things that could make you ceremonially unclean, and this uncleanness was passed through physical touch. Many of these purity laws had to do with certain animals which would defile you and make you unclean if they were eaten.

- ✓ Leviticus 11:42-43 – Whatever goes on its belly, and whatever goes on all fours, or whatever has many feet, any swarming thing that swarms on the ground, you shall not eat, for they are detestable. You shall not make yourselves detestable with any swarming thing that swarms, and you shall not defile yourselves with them, and become unclean through them.

But take even a *clean* animal; if the meat of a clean animal touched something unclean, then that meat also became unclean and was no longer fit to be eaten.

- ✓ Leviticus 7:19 – Flesh that touches any unclean thing shall not be eaten. It shall be burned up with fire.

It was certainly possible that a person could become unclean unknowingly.

- ✓ Leviticus 5:2, 5-6 – If anyone touches an unclean thing... and it is hidden from him and he has become unclean... when he realizes his guilt... he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering.

Now it was the job of Israel's religious leaders (especially the priests) to interpret, and explain, and apply God's law for the people. As the generations passed, these interpretations and explanations and applications of the law passed into "tradition" – basically an oral commentary on the law. (This oral commentary was not put down in writing until at least 150 years after Jesus – the end of the second century.) Now many of these "traditions" certainly started out as a good thing, but as time went on, you could say that the "tradition" got out of hand. As the scribes explained how to observe and keep certain of God's laws, they began to add *extra safeguards* against breaking those laws. Not *all* of these safeguards were necessarily bad in and of themselves, but over time, they came to be treated as though they were on the same level with Scripture. One of these extra-biblical "safeguards" was the washing of hands before meals.

In the Old Testament law, the *priests* were commanded to wash their hands and their feet whenever they would approach the altar to burn a food offering to the Lord (Exodus 30:17-21). So apparently the scribes thought it would be a good idea to transfer this hand-washing requirement to everyone – just as a precaution. Maybe they were also thinking of Leviticus 15:11...

- ✓ Leviticus 15:11 (cf. 11:25, 28, 32) – Anyone whom the one with the discharge touches without having rinsed his hands in water shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening.

But whatever their thinking and reasoning, this tradition was now firmly established – at least in the circles of all those who would claim to be *teachers*. And so now these teachers from Jerusalem have come to hold Jesus *accountable* to their tradition: "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."

III. Matthew 15:3 – He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"

At first, it may not look like Jesus is answering the Pharisees' question – but He actually *is* answering the question! Here's the point: *Your traditions* are **NOT** the same thing as *God's commandments* – though you treat them as if they *were*. And now Jesus will give the Pharisees an example of the very thing he is talking about:

IV. Matthew 15:4-6 – For God commanded, "Honor your father and your mother," [Exodus 20:12] and, "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die." [Exodus 21:17] But you say, "If anyone tells his father or his mother, 'What you would have gained from me is given to God,' he need [lit. "must"] not honor his father." So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.

The Old Testament made provisions for a man to vow or dedicate a part of his property to the Lord.

- ✓ Leviticus 27:9 – If the vow is an animal that may be offered as an offering to the LORD, all of it that he gives to the LORD is holy.
- ✓ Leviticus 27:16 – If a man dedicates to the LORD part of the land that is his possession, then the valuation shall be in proportion to its seed.

Notice that these vows consisted of a *part* of one's property (they were not vows of poverty), and notice that the vows were paid immediately and within the person's lifetime. But Jesus seems to be referring to a situation where people would vow most, if not *all* of their property to God to be paid only upon their *death*! Now whatever we may think of this kind of practice, the Old Testament was very clear that vows must be kept.

- ✓ Deuteronomy 23:21-23 – If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.

So the Scribes had to make a ruling. What do you do when you've vowed all of your property to the temple treasury upon your death, and then your elderly parents end up in need of financial help before you die? Well, the scribes ruled that your primary obligation was to fulfill your vow to the Lord. You must by all means and at all costs fulfill your vow to the Lord. God must come before parents. This was how the Pharisees would have explained their tradition.

But then Jesus goes on to make the Pharisees say something that none of them would have wanted to say: Therefore, ***you say*** that a person ***must not*** honor his father. This tradition of vowing all of your property to the temple treasury to be paid only upon your death and then ruling that this vow takes precedence over the clear commandment of God is to make void the Word of God. In the first place, the vow was foolish and should never have been made, and in the second place, when the vow becomes the cause or the justification of disobedience to God's law it is better to break the vow and suffer whatever consequences may come. But again, the Pharisees would never have said that they were *forbidding* someone to honor their parents. They certainly would not have wanted to say that this "inability" to help one's parents was the same thing as "*reviling*" one's parents! But just like in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is going to the true intention and heart of God's law. And so "in effect, denial of support to one's parents was the *same* as speaking evil against them." (Hagner) I wonder how often we are blinded to our own sin by the happy thought that we are fulfilling the "letter" of the law? So Jesus says to the Pharisees: Your tradition *appears* to be so pious and spiritual, but it's *actually* the exact *opposite*. Your pious and spiritual tradition is really just your ***substitute*** for ***true*** spirituality!

V. Matthew 15:7-9 – You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

Of course, Isaiah was speaking about the people in his *own* day – not about the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. And yet Jesus says that Isaiah prophesied of the Pharisees! Just as Isaiah was a type or pointer to Jesus, the great prophet who was to come— so also the generation of *Isaiah’s* day was a type and pointer to the generation of *Jesus’* day. If all the prophets of the Old Testament were sent to a hypocritical people, then it cannot be that Jesus’ experience should be any different (Matt. 23:34-37; Luke 13:33). And so Jesus sees the Pharisees as a fulfillment of prophesy. They honor God with their lips (with their pious traditions), but their *heart* is far from God. Their worship of God is in vain because they have taken their own traditions and taught them to others as though they were the very *commandments* of God!

So the Pharisees and scribes ask Jesus: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” And Jesus answers: “Your traditions are not the same thing as God’s commandments. In fact, your “pious” and “spiritual” traditions have become nothing more than a counterfeit *substitute* for *true spirituality*.”

Conclusion

Have any of us seen ourselves in these verses? Have we been convicted by the stinging rebuke of Jesus’ words? It’s easy for us to sit in judgment over the Pharisees and to condemn their obvious hypocrisy, and so we are quick (*and right*) to agree with Calvin when he says this:

“We know how rigidly the Law of God demands outward cleanness; not that the Lord intended that this should occupy the whole attention of his servants, but that they might be more careful to guard against every spiritual defilement. But in *washings* the Law preserved some moderation... [However], many things were practiced by the scribes, which they had *voluntarily* undertaken to keep. They were secondary *laws* invented by the curiosity of men, as if the plain command of God were not enough. God commanded [washings]... But to invent other [*required* washings] was idle and useless... If they had rested in the Law of God alone, that modesty would have been more agreeable to Him than solicitude about small matters. They were desirous to warn a person not to take food while he was unclean, through want of consideration [unknowingly]; but the Lord reckoned it enough to wash away those defilements of which they were aware.” (Calvin)

How many of us are cheering Calvin along right now? – Or at least saying “amen” and nodding our heads in agreement? While I do agree with Calvin, let’s see how we feel about the next quote from Frederick Bruner. We may be forced to admit that what the Pharisees did would make a lot of sense to many Christians today, and to most, if not all of us in this room.

“The devotion of washing one’s hands ritually before a meal was developed by [the religious leaders] not in order to break Scripture but in order to honor Scripture. If anyone touched an unclean person or thing, perhaps even unknowingly, the uncleanness could be removed by the precaution of this washing. The washing was simply one of many ways by which serious believers could say by their actions, ‘We love Scripture,’ and ‘We don’t even want accidentally to break the holy commands of God.’ Apparently the [religious leaders], to be completely safe, even took full-immersion baptismal baths every morning

and on every return from public life. These people longed to be clean before God... [They] 'wanted to sanctify the *entirety* of life, to make *common life* as holy as the temple, filled with the presence of God. To this end they agreed to handle, sell, and eat food in virtually the same state of purity as that which the Bible prescribes for the *priests* who serve in the temple.'" (Bruner)

Was it a sin for people to wash their hands before meals as an expression of their desire to be ceremonially clean? No, not at all! In fact, I would venture to guess that if these hand washings were practiced with the right *heart* and true *faith*, they may very well have been acceptable and pleasing in God's sight! But the problem came in when the hand washings were made into a *law* and the "*moderation*" and "*modesty*" of God's law was ignored – as though God's law did not go quite far enough. You see, the problem comes in when *we* take our own *voluntary* practices of piety and devotion and make them into *authoritative* traditions, *teaching* them to others as though they were the very *commandments* of God! And so in this way we, too, are guilty of questioning the moderation and modesty of God's law – as though God's law has not gone far enough and so therefore we need to take it the rest of the way. But how do we do this?

Well, let's take the example of alcoholic beverages such as wine or beer. (I am using this example because it is so simple and straightforward. However, most of us will need to see how the principle applies in other areas besides that of alcoholic beverages. I will give some other examples later.) The Bible very clearly says: "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery" (Eph. 5:18). Drunkenness is clearly a violation of God's Word. Drunkenness is a sin – a sin that can be *forgiven*! In our American culture, alcoholic beverages are very much associated with drunkenness – though this is *certainly not* always the case. There are many Christians who have grown up in families that have been broken and shattered by the effects of drunkenness. In light of these things, there have been many Christians who have chosen to abstain from any and all forms of alcohol as an expression of their devotion to God and His Word. They have made it their practice not only to avoid drunkenness, which the Bible commands, but even to avoid alcohol itself – *which the Bible does not command*. In verse eleven Jesus says very clearly that "it is *not* what goes *into* the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." This explicit principle could not possibly be any more clear! Of course, next week we'll also see how our decision to enjoy an alcoholic beverage can easily be the *expression* of a defiled and unclean *heart*. Let me just say that if you are listening to this message, then you are "obligated" to listen to next week's message! But for right now, let me ask: Is there anything wrong with avoiding any and all forms of alcohol as an expression of devotion to God and His Word? No! Not at all! If we do this with the right heart, and as an expression of true faith, then we can be assured that this decision is *acceptable* to God and *pleasing* in His sight. But the problem comes in when we take this *voluntary* practice of piety and devotion and make it into an *authoritative* tradition, *teaching* it to others as though it were the very *commandment* of God! And so what can happen is we begin to undermine the sufficiency of God's word – basically doubting whether it has really gone far enough. Most of us would not be quite so blatant, but we can so often *end up* saying the same thing in slightly more subtle ways. Now it's possible that some people right now are thinking that I am preaching a message on the acceptability of alcohol. This is obviously not the case, since I have already said that the enjoyment of an alcoholic beverage *can be* the expression of a defiled and unclean heart. What I *am* preaching on is the danger of taking our voluntary practices of piety and devotion and

making them into authoritative traditions, teaching them to others (whether our children or not) *as though* they were the very commandments of God!

But *why* is this so dangerous – apart from the fact that it is to undermine the *sufficiency* of God’s word? Well, we have already seen what happened with the Pharisees. “They brought an accusation to our Lord against His disciples. But what was its nature? It was not that they were covetous or self-righteous. It was not that they were untruthful or uncharitable... But they “... did not wash their hands when they ate bread” (Ryle). In the same way, we will begin to *judge* our brother not because he is covetous, or self-righteous, or untruthful, or uncharitable, or guilty of gluttony and debauchery, but rather because we saw a beer in his refrigerator, or because he ordered a glass of wine when he was out to eat. (I won’t talk about the godly pastor that I know—and pastor of a very solid Bible-believing church—who has a wine rack in his kitchen!) We will see our brother sharing the Gospel with his neighbor over an alcoholic beverage (a neighbor who never drinks to drunkenness) and we will be more quick to censor him for the alcohol than to thank God for his example of obedience to God and love for his neighbor. Indeed, we will be more quick to censor our brother for his alcoholic drink than to confess our own sinful failure to share the Gospel with our own neighbors. In the end, it can be far too easy for our abstaining from alcohol, or from various forms of social media such as Twitter and Facebook, or from R-rated movies, or from T.V., or from secular music, etc., etc. etc.... it can be far too easy for our abstinence from these things to become a *substitute* for *true* spirituality. Is this message a plug for Facebook, R-rated movies, T.V., and secular music? NO! It is a warning against confusing our own pious inventions with the requirements of God. It is a warning against replacing the works that God requires with ideas and works of our own. We set aside the true heart of God’s law and then how do we sooth our consciences? – By our very strict “obedience” to human traditions (traditions that began in many cases as voluntary practices of true piety and devotion)! And so we, too, can be guilty of making void the word of God for the sake of our tradition. If I could change up something that the German reformer Martin Bucer once said: “A man is rarely to be found, who pays an excessive attention to human inventions in religion, who does not take more delight in these inventions than in the true requirements of God’s law.”¹

Ryle warns us: “The spirit of the Pharisees still lives, after eighteen hundred years. The disposition to ‘make the word of God of none effect by traditions,’ is to be found among Christians, as well as among Jews. The tendency practically to exalt man’s inventions [no matter how “spiritual” or “pious”] above God’s word, is still fearfully prevalent. May we watch against it and be on our guard!” Where is this tendency still prevalent among *us*? In what subtle ways have we been teaching as doctrines the commandments of men? How have we made our voluntary expressions of devotion into authoritative human traditions? How have we judged others for failing to live up to our own rules of human origin? How have we been blinded to our own sinful failures to truly obey God’s law because we are satisfied with our careful conformity to human traditions? In whatever ways we have been guilty of these things, we need to *repent*. We need to come back to the heart and soul of all true *holy* living – and that is the glorious *Gospel* of Jesus Christ, and Him crucified for sinners like us... like *you*... and like *me*.

¹ What Martin Bucer said was this: “A man is rarely to be found, who pays an excessive attention to human inventions in religion, who does not put more trust in them than in the grace of God” (quoted in Ryle).