
What Defiles

Matthew 15:1-20¹

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Last week we saw the feeding of the 5,000, walking on the sea and the healings in Gennesaret. Those miracles cry out to us, “This must be God!” And that’s what the disciples on the boat finally saw, “Truly you are the Son of God”. Yet there is both faith and lack of faith in last week’s text. And we will see that back and forth through chapter 17, from no faith, little faith, and great faith. There are and will be those who are completely blind, and those who should have clear vision but sometimes still do not see. We seem to see this most vividly in Jesus’ disciples. In the midst of what is becoming increased religious opposition against Jesus, his disciples go back and forth in their faith, almost as if they are incapable of getting it.

That’s the context. 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 made well. And so we saw all three – no faith, little faith, and great faith all in last weeks text. In Pastor Russ exposition of comparable text in Mark, he used the phrase, “The disciples are nor blind, but are not seeing” to explain this phenomena.

And in that context, the scribes and Pharisees show their spiritual blindness. That is why Matthew places this story here, in the midst of this back and forth.

1. Jesus’ meeting with the Pharisees (15:1–9)
 - Their accusation (15:1–2)

These scribes and Pharisees came from Jerusalem. They were not a part of the group that had been following Jesus. This may have been a special envoy sent to investigate and challenge our Lord. They would have been thought of as having superior training, in contrast to those who had been following Jesus through Galilee. The opposition to Jesus continues to become more intense. We don’t know how many of Jesus’ miracles they may or may not have witnessed, but they certainly had heard of them, or they would not have been sent.

Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?

In this text, the word elders literally means old men. It speaks of their ancestors. The tradition of the elders meant something handed down from one to another by memory; some precept or custom not commanded in the written law. These are things the scribes and Pharisees consider

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themselves bound to observe. They supposed that when Moses was on Mount Sinai two sets of laws were delivered to him: one, they said, was recorded, and the other was handed down from father to son and kept uncorrupted to their day. They believed that Moses, before he died, delivered this law to Joshua; Joshua to the judges; the judges to the prophets; so that it was kept pure until it was recorded in the repository of Jewish tradition known as the Talmud. One commentator writes, "By Jesus' day, the tradition of the elders had for many years supplanted Scripture as the supreme religious authority in the minds of Jewish leaders and of most of the people. The traditions even affirmed that 'the words of scribes are more lovely than the words of the law,' and it became a greater offense in Judaism to transgress the teaching of some rabbi such as the revered Hillel than to transgress the teaching of Scripture."² The washing of hands probably began for the sake of cleanliness. But at this point they had made it a matter of superstition.

Water jars were kept ready to be used before every meal. The minimum amount of water to be used was enough to fill one and a half egg shells. The water was first poured on both hands, held with the fingers pointed upward; and it must run down the arm as far as the wrist and drop off from the wrist, for the water was now itself unclean, having touched the unclean hands. And if it ran down the fingers again it would render them unclean. The process was repeated with hands held in the downward direction, the fingers pointing down. And finally, each hand was cleansed by being rubbed with the fist of the other. A strict Jew would do this before every meal and between every course in every meal.³

- His condemnation (15:3–9)
 - Honoring father and mother (3-6)

In order to properly understand the context we have to spend significant time looking back into the Old Testament at Jewish laws and also looking at the traditions of the Pharisees. As with their accusation, here's an example of this in Jesus' condemnation.

In verses one and two the Pharisees accused Jesus of violating their traditions, as though they were obligatory. In verse three Jesus implies that his disciples were not bound to obey their traditions because they were invented by men and because they violated the commandments of God. In the next two verses he then proceeds to give them a case study in which their tradition made void one of the plain laws of God.

God had plainly commanded in the fifth commandment to honor father and mother. They would have understood 'to honor' as to obey, to reverence, to speak kindly to, to speak and think well of. The opposite would be to disobey, to treat with no reference, to swear at, to speak ill of, to seek evil of in the heart, or do any evil. The Jewish law punished this crime with

² John F. MacArthur Jr., Matthew, vol. 2, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 452.

³ Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, vol. 2, pp. 10–13.

death. This duty of honoring and obeying a parent was what Jesus said they had violated in their traditions. He then explains exactly what he means.

Look again at verses five and six. "But you say, if anyone tells his father or his mother, what you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God."

Jesus is speaking of a Pharisaical tradition that allowed people to designate a gift to the service of God and therefore not to be used for any other function. The Jews were in the habit of making such dedications. They would devote, or promise, their property to God for sacred uses as they pleased. In doing so they were bound by the law to pay unto the Lord what they had promised.

While the law of God required that a son should honor his parents; among other things that he should provide for their wants when they were old and in distress, Jewish teachers said that it was more important for a man to dedicate his property to God. Once he devoted his property to God it could not be used even to support a parent. And so, if a parent were needy and poor, and if the parent should ask the son for assistance, the son should reply, "It is devoted to God; this property which you need, and by which you might have profited from by me, I have given it to God." According to the Jewish leaders and teachers this person had done a more important thing by giving it to God. The son was now free from his obligation to his parents. He could not be required to do anything for his parents after that. Some Jewish men would take advantage of this to spite their parents, even though it may have appeared to have an appearance of godliness.

Jesus is not condemning the practice of giving to God, because this was what the law and the gospel both require. But he was condemning the practice of giving to God where it interfered with their duty to parents.

- You Hypocrites! (7-9)

The hypocrisy in this case was the concealment of disobedience to the law under the pretense of religion. They are attempting to get rid of the duty of providing for needy parents under an appearance of righteousness toward God.

Jesus quotes from Isaiah 29:13. "Isaiah prophesied of you". That is, he spoke of the Jews in terms of the whole people, he was characterizing the nation in calling them all hypocrites.

Why are they hypocrites? They are regular in their worship; they are strict in their ceremonial observances; they keep the law outwardly; but God requires the heart and that they have not given. Their attempts to worship are vain. It is not true worship it is simply forms of religion. Their doctrines are simply the requirements of their religion - things to be believed and practiced religiously. They have held their traditions to be superior to the written Word of God and taught them as doctrines binding the consciences of the people.

The Pharisee's believe they are honoring God by their practice alone. Jesus makes it clear that genuine worship is impossible unless people's hearts are turned to God.

One author writes, "To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, and to devote the will to the purpose of God."⁴

Jesus' meeting with the people (15:10–11)

In direct opposition to the doctrines of the Pharisees, Jesus now calls the people to him to show that the great source of pollution was the heart. The Jews suppose that external things principally defile the man, because that's what they have been taught by their Elders. On this one thing all their doctrines about purification were based. Jesus found it critical here to correct their conviction and so he took this occasion to direct the people to the true source of defilement - their own hearts. Matthew shows the importance of Jesus teaching by making sure to include Jesus opening words, "Hear and understand."

The disciples were charged with being sinners for transgressing the tradition of the Elders and eating with unwashed hands. Jesus replies that what they eat could not make them sinners. The man, the soul, could not be polluted by anything that was eaten. What proceeds from the man himself, from his heart, would defile him.

Jesus' meeting with the disciples and Peter (15:12–20)

- The Pharisees offense (12-14)

Of course the Pharisees were offended. They were so zealous in their traditions that they certainly could not endure that they were being exposed and attacked by Jesus.

Jesus compares their doctrine to plants. Theology and doctrine are planted in the mind for the purpose of producing fruit in the life. Therefore, we say you must believe the Bible in an obeying way. Right thinking produces right conduct. Jesus here is simply saying that all those doctrines of which the Father is not the author must be rooted up or corrected. And so, he has no choice in attacking the false doctrines of the Pharisees.

Jesus tells his disciples to let them alone. Don't be troubled by their rage. Don't be anxious about it. They are intensely attached to their traditions. And they lead the blind. These Pharisees have a vast influence over the multitudes, and it is to be expected that they will be enraged at any of Jesus' teaching that lessens their authority or their influence. By commanding the disciples to let them alone, Christ doesn't mean that they were to be silent or not make any attempt to refute their wrong teaching, because that is exactly what Jesus is doing. Jesus is simply telling his disciples not to mind them. They are blind guides leading their blind students.

⁴ Archbishop William Temple, source unknown.

A blind man, attempting to lead another blind man, would fall into every ditch that was in the way. So it is with these religious teachers. If these Pharisees, themselves ignorant and blind, should be allowed to lead the ignorant multitude, both would be destroyed. This is another reason for Jesus to refute their errors and to root up the plants which God himself has not planted. Jesus' desire by doing this is to save this deceived multitude of people.

Peter stays and asks for clarification (15-20)

There are two types of people when it comes to hearing the preaching of God's Word, or in studying God's Word.

The first type of person hears or reads something that they don't understand, and promptly throws up their hands and walks away complaining that the sermon is too difficult, or God's Word is too hard to understand. We see this often when Jesus tells parables. They are purposely confusing, and hard to understand, and so most people simply walk away confused and frustrated.

But the second type of person is the person that stays and asks for clarification. They may not understand the message, but they go to the preacher and ask for help in understanding. These are the people that not only read God's Word but put in the time and effort to learn how to properly study God's Word so that they can understand it in its context, and richness.

As we look through Matthew and, in fact, any gospel where Jesus teaches parables, we find that in almost every case, the disciples stay and ask for clarification. And when they do, Jesus is gracious in giving it.

But even though Peter uses the term parable, I don't think it is a parable at all. Why do I say that? Because Jesus made it very clear in verse ten that he intends for the crowd of people to get it. Hear, and understand was a common idiom that meant, "Listen carefully and pay close attention," and was used to precede a message of great importance. It was not that what Jesus said would be hard to *understand* but that it would be hard to *accept*.

Jesus is speaking here in the plainest of terms. Nothing is hidden. And the interchange Jesus has with Peter here makes it clear that Peter and the disciples should have understood. No explanation should have been required.

Jesus then appeals somewhat to their common sense. He wonders why they have not yet learned to judge the foolish traditions of the Jews by their own common sense and by his own instructions. Don't you understand this yet? Could this be another example of disciples not being blind, but not seeing.

The food that we eat does not affect the mind, and therefore cannot pollute it. And because this is true and our common sense tells us this, the doctrine of the Pharisees cannot be true. These things pertain to the body and cannot affect the soul. The seat of immorality is within, it is the heart itself. If men would be made pure the heart must be cleansed, for if the heart is corrupt, the entire man is corrupt.

This is what defiles the man. First his evil thoughts. Because these are the first things and are the foundations of all the other things. Thought precedes action. Thought, or purpose, or motive, gives character to conduct. Jesus' list here is not complete, it is characteristic. It is not Jesus' intent to ask or explain how every item on his list results directly in defiling. Jesus' point is that what a man truly *is* affects what he *says and does*. The burden of the story is not to be pure on the inside and forget the externals but that what ultimately defiles a man is what he really is. Jesus is not spiritualizing the Old Testament but insisting that true faith must deal with the nature of man and not with mere externals.

These are the things which defile a man. These are what corrupt. It is not the neglect of washing the body which defiles; it's the deep, inward corruption of the heart. What a collection of evil thoughts and deeds proceed from the heart of a person!

And so, Jesus makes it clear that he is not so concerned with the ritual practice, or form, of religion as much as he is the heart of his people. Jesus wants to see people transformed and their hearts renewed because he came to save his people from their sins.

What we've read this morning continues to move us further and further toward the Kingdom. Jesus is not only rejecting the Pharisees and the teachers of the law as authentic interpreters of Scripture, but he is assigning that role absolutely and completely to himself. This conflict will only get worse and will ultimately bring Jesus to the cross.

Reflect and Respond

What external traditions or beliefs do we honor that keep us from the real issue of the heart?

Where have you seen hypocrisy in yourself? Where have your words and actions failed to match up to your stated beliefs? Where has there been a gap between your biblical knowledge and righteous practice?

What does it look like to have a heart that honors and glorifies God?

Talk to God about this in prayer. Listen as he speaks to you through his Word. "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23).