

DEALING WITH HEART ISSUES

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Scripture: Matthew 15: 1-20

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15 Then *some* 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 bread.” ³ And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves also break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘he one who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.’ ⁵ But you say, ‘Whoever says to *his* father or mother, ‘Whatever I have that would help you has been given *to God*,’ ⁶ he is not to honor his father *or* mother.’ And *by this* you have invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy about you, by saying:

⁸ ‘This people honors Me with their lips,

But their heart is far away from Me.

⁹ And in vain do they worship Me,

Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”

¹⁰ After Jesus called the crowd to Him, He said to them, “Hear and understand! ¹¹ *It is* not what enters the mouth *that* defiles the person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles the person.”

¹² Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” ¹³ But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Leave them alone; they are blind guides of blind people. And if a person who is blind guides *another* who is blind, both will fall into a pit.”

¹⁵ Peter said to Him, “Explain the parable to us.” ¹⁶ Jesus said, “Are you also still lacking in understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and those things defile the person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, *acts of* adultery, *other* immoral sexual acts, thefts, false testimonies, *and* slanderous statements. ²⁰ These are the things that defile the person; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the person.”

Will you pray with me? Heavenly Father, as we look into Your word this morning, may our thoughts align with Your thoughts. May the words we hear find receptive ground in our lives, and may our wills, Lord, which can sometimes be so obstinate and stubborn, be pliable in Your hands this morning. we ask this in Your name, Lord Jesus. Amen.

We read a passage like this and think: this is quite an interesting passage. There are so many components to it, and it makes for interesting study and contrast. At the very outset, I want to present to you that there are two kinds of overarching ideas in front of us as we move through these 20 verses.

- On the one hand, Jesus is confronting external religion, a religion that is focused on traditions, ritual purity, and outward appearances. Now, it can look very good. it can appear clean and disciplined and deeply spiritual. But beneath that outward appearance, the heart may be far from God.

- On the other hand, Jesus is calling us to true obedience, a life shaped by God's word, marked by integrity of heart, and flowing from an inner transformation that is brought about by God's Spirit.

So, in very simple terms, Jesus is exposing a religion that looks clean on the outside, but is corrupt at the heart level. The contrast throughout this passage is therefore, external religion versus true obedience, outward performance versus inward transformation, and human tradition versus God's truth.

I want us to keep these contrasts in mind as we walk through this passage, because Jesus is ultimately calling us back to an obedience that doesn't simply perform on the outside but flows from what God is doing on the inside.

So, let's look at these verses in sections:

vs. 1-9 TRADITION REPLACES TRUTH.

The passage begins with a confrontation. The Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus and ask, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat."

Now, this wasn't about hygiene, nor was it during COVID. This was entirely about ritual purity. Tradition developed over time, and then was treated as if it was binding on every Jew.

But notice what Jesus does. He doesn't answer their question directly. Instead, He turns the question back on them and says, "Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition, your man-made human traditions? And that is the real issue.

Then He gives a very concrete example. God had clearly commanded: Honor your father and your mother. And the law reinforced how seriously that command was to be taken.

But the religious leaders had developed a practice called *korban*, which meant that a person could declare his money or possessions to be dedicated to God. Now, on the surface, that sounds wonderful, wonderfully spiritual, if you would. Because you're saying this belongs to God. But there was an ulterior motive behind what they were doing, because the problem was that if a person had resources that could have been used to take care of their elderly parents, he could declare those resources as *korban* and therefore make them unavailable to carry out that responsibility. In other words, the money that they should have used to take care of elderly parents by honoring them, they were saying: this is *korban*, which means this money is dedicated to God and so I cannot use it for taking care of my parents.

So, earthly responsibility was being put away, especially the responsibility that God had placed upon them. so, in effect, a religious tradition had created a loophole through which a person could appear deeply devoted to God while avoiding a very clear command of God.

And Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of it. you're using something that looks religious to justify disobedience to the law. You have taken a tradition that is designed by people and allowed it to override the word of God. That is why Jesus says, "You nullify the word of God by your tradition." You neutralize the word of God by these human-made traditions.

Then He quotes Isaiah and He says, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." That is devastating to hear. Because outwardly they are religious and inwardly distant.

Their worship looks right, their language sounds right. Their practices appear spiritual but their hearts are nowhere near to God. They have learned how to look obedient without actually obeying.

vs. 10-11 THE INSIDE, AND NOT THE OUTSIDE, IS IMPORTANT

here, He reframes this very radically. He turns away from the Pharisees and He addresses the crowd. And He makes a statement that would have been startling, perhaps even shocking to everyone listening. He says, "It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person."

Remember the world in which Jesus was speaking. People had been taught to think about clean and unclean things, what was kosher in very external terms. What you are, mattered. What you touched, mattered. Who you associated with, mattered. There were all kinds of regulations designed to preserve external purity.

And Jesus now says, in effect, you have misunderstood where the real problem lies. The problem isn't primarily outside of you; the problem is inside. You can wash your hands and still have an unclean heart. You can eat the right food and still harbor hatred. You can observe every religious ritual and still be filled with pride. You can look clean on the outside while something very different is happening on the inside.

Jesus is moving the conversation from ceremonial cleanliness to moral cleanliness. Notice how radical this is. The Pharisees were concerned about what entered the body. Jesus is concerned about what emerges from the heart, because what comes out of us reveals already what is happening within us. And Jesus is actually bringing us back to something that the Old Testament had already taught in Proverbs 4:23. "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."

The Biblical understanding of the heart is that it is the center of our inner life. Our thoughts, our desires, our decisions, our attitudes, all emanate from the heart. What is happening there eventually finds its way out in the way we speak and behave. Jesus is saying, in effect, don't just worry about keeping the outside clean. Pay attention to the source from which your life is flowing out.

That's why the real issue is not simply what we touch or eat or avoid. The deeper question is: what is happening in my heart? Because sooner or later, what is in the heart will find its way out to the surface. Our words reveal something. Our actions reveal something. Our attitudes reveal something. Under pressure especially, what is inside of us tends to come out.

That makes Proverbs 4:23 and Jesus' teaching remarkably complimentary. Guard the heart because the life flows from it. Transform the heart because what flows from it will eventually shape your life.

That gives us an important principle. What comes out of us under pressure often reveals who we are and what is inside of us. When somebody irritates us, what comes out? When someone challenges our authority, what comes out? When we are disappointed, what comes out? When somebody hurts us, what comes out? When we don't get our way, what comes out?

We might be able to control our behavior for a while. We might be able to maintain a respectable exterior. But sooner or later, what is inside will find its way out. And Jesus is saying, don't spend all your energy managing the outside when the real work needs to happen on the inside.

vs. 12-14 THE DANGER OF FALSE RELIGION

The disciples now come to Jesus with a very interesting observation. They say, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?” Well, of course they were. Jesus had just challenged the very foundation of their religious system, the system that they had built. He had exposed the possibility that their carefully constructed traditions could actually be taking people away from God rather than bringing them closer to Him.

But you don’t hear Jesus apologizing. Instead, He responds with two very powerful statements.

1. He says, “Every plant that My Heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.” What a picture. Something can look established and impressive, and still not be something that God has planted.

A religious system can become deeply rooted in culture. It can have history. It can have institutions. It can have traditions. It can have respected leaders. It can have thousands of followers. But none of these things necessarily mean that God planted. Jesus is saying that what is not rooted in God will not ultimately survive.

2. He gives another picture. “Leave them,” He says, “they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

That’s a sobering image to see two blind people walking. They may walk maybe with some amount of confidence. They may speak with some authority. They may even convince the other person that they know exactly where they are going. But confidence doesn’t create sight.

Religious authority does not necessarily mean spiritual understanding. That’s the danger of false religion. It can give people the confidence that they can see when they are actually blind. A person who knows they are blind will look for help. But a person who is blind and believes that they can see will keep on walking and may even persuade others to follow them.

That’s why Jesus’ warning is not only about the Pharisees. It’s a warning to all of us about the voices we allow to shape our understanding of God. We can be sincere and still be sincerely wrong. We can be deeply religious and yet miss the heart of God. We can know scripture intellectually and still fail to allow scripture to transform us internally.

There’s a sobering responsibility for anyone who teaches or leads others spiritually, especially if people are following us, that the question that we need to ask is: where are we taking them? Are we leading them towards Jesus? Towards God’s word? Towards truth and transformation? Or are we simply reproducing our own traditions, preferences, prejudices, and religious habits?

The tragedy Jesus describes is not simply that the blind are walking; it is that the blind are leading others who trust them. That becomes particularly relevant in our world today because we live in a culture of followers. We talk about followers on Instagram and Facebook and YouTube and X and all the other social media platforms that are out there. We measure influence by how many people follow us.

But Jesus’ question takes that idea to a much deeper level. Who is following you and where are you taking them? If people are watching our lives, what are they seeing? Are they seeing good character? Are they seeing integrity? Are they seeing humility? Are they seeing faithfulness? Are they seeing someone who genuinely follows Jesus? Or are they seeing anger? Are they seeing pride? Are they

seeing bitterness, self-promotion, compromise, and a life that may say one thing on one day or on one post and something very different the rest of the day?

Remember beloved, if we have people watching us, whether it's online or at the office or at college, and we have some leadership capacity, we are influencing them. And influence always carries responsibility. So, perhaps every one of us who has some level of influence should occasionally stop and ask – if someone followed my life, would I be leading them closer to Jesus or further away from Him?

Ultimately the goal isn't to have more followers. The goal is to make sure that the people who follow us can see Jesus more clearly because they have watched our lives. We are not the end goal; Jesus is.

Then, there's another warning here for us. We need to be careful about who we allow into our lives, the things that we allow into our lives to shape our understanding of God. Be careful! Test everything that you hear. Not everybody who speaks confidently about God actually might know God. Not every tradition is truth. Not every religious practice is obedience. Not every spiritual-looking teaching is from God.

Be like the Bereans who tested everything. They took the word and went to God's word and said: Let's see if it is true. So if people are watching their lives, we need to be very careful where they are going and who they are seeing. Because the greatest tragedy isn't simply being blind; it's being blind and convincing somebody else to follow you.

vs. 15-20

Jesus then shows us what truly defiles. Peter is struggling with what Jesus has said. So he asks Him to explain the parable. And Jesus essentially says, you still don't understand after all this? And I resonate with Peter here. I think Peter asked the question that everybody else had around him. It's just that he voiced it. And everybody said, yeah, yeah. That's it. I was thinking the same thing.

Jesus explains that what enters the mouth goes into the stomach and eventually passes out. Food doesn't make a person morally clean or morally unclean.

Now Jesus gives a list that is deeply uncomfortable because He takes the problem right inside. He speaks of evil thoughts. He speaks of murder and adultery and sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Notice where all of these things originate. The heart. Jesus isn't saying that actions don't matter. They matter enormously. He's saying that sinful actions are symptoms of something deeper. Murder begins with something in the heart before it ever becomes an act. Adultery begins with something in the heart before it ever becomes an affair. Slander begins with something in the heart before it becomes words that are spoken about another person. The external behavior is simply the fruit, and not every fruit is edible.

I remember a song from yesteryear by Peter, Paul and Mary. It goes like this:

*Lemon tree very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet;
But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat.*

The external behavior is simply the fruit of what's going on inside, and not every fruit that people see is alluring and accepting to them. The heart is at the root of the issue, the root of the problem.

That is why Jesus' teaching is so radical. The Pharisees were trying to become clean by controlling the outside, and Jesus says that the real need is for God to transform the inside. You can control what you eat, you can control what you wear, you can control where you go, you can control what other people see.

But eventually, what is in your heart will find its way into your words, your actions, your attitudes, and your relationships. So Jesus isn't merely asking us to behave better; He's asking us to become different people from the inside out.

This is where the gospel becomes so important because if the problem was simply behavior, then perhaps we can fix ourselves through greater discipline. But the problem is the heart. And because it's the heart, we need something deeper than behavior modification. We need the Holy Spirit to begin transformation from the inside out. We need God to do in us what we cannot do for ourselves.

CONCLUSION

So, as we wrap up these 20 verses, what is Jesus doing? Well, He's taken up on a journey. He's moved us:

- from external performance to internal transformation,
- from religious activity to genuine obedience,
- from clean hands to clean hearts,
- from what people see to what God sees.

That changes the question that we need to ask ourselves. The question isn't simply: do I look like a good person or a good Christian? The deeper question is: Is my heart aligned with God? Because it's entirely possible to say the right things, attend the right places, observe the right practices, know the right scriptures, and even do many good things and yet allow our hearts to drift away from God.

Perhaps, that's what makes this passage so searching. The goal of Christianity is not to become better at appearing Christian. It is to be transformed by Christ from the inside out so that the character of Jesus becomes increasingly visible in the way that we live and act and speak. He wants our outward lives to become the natural expression of a transformed inward reality. So,

- when kindness comes out, it is because kindness has been cultivated within us.
- when forgiveness comes out, it is because grace has been working within us,
- when patience comes out, it is because Christ is forming patience within us,
- when truth comes out, it is because truth has taken root within us,
- when love comes out, it is because we have first been transformed by the love of God.

That, beloved, is true obedience. Not simply doing the right things, but becoming the kind of person from whom the right things naturally flow.

So, our takeaway this morning: I don't think we should end this passage by saying – that's a good lesson. We enjoyed this. We need to have clean hearts.

But let's take it further. MAKE IT PERSONAL. Because if Jesus is right, and He is, then what comes out of us flows from what is already inside of us. Then perhaps we need to stop for a moment and allow God's Spirit to do a mining work within us, under the surface. What is actually going on in my heart? Not what do other people see, not what do I want them to see, not even what do I do, or what do I tell myself to showcase to people around me. but to ask the question: what does Jesus see when He looks into my heart?

Perhaps this is a moment to pray a very simple prayer. Lord Jesus, would You search my heart and see if there be any wicked way in me, anything that is not aligned with Your will? And then show me, Lord, the things that are there. show me the resentment that I have been carrying. Show me the bitterness that I may have justified. Show me the pride that I've hidden. Show me jealousy, insecurity, anger, unforgiveness, the lust, the desire for recognition. Show me all these things, Lord, the need to be in control. Show me the places where my heart has become hard even while my outward life seems religious.

Then let's push it further and say: Don't just show me, Lord. CHANGE ME.

Holy Spirit, would You come and do the work in me that I cannot do myself? Where there is bitterness, Lord, would You bring forgiveness? Where there's pride, would You replace with humility? Where there's anger, would You bring gentleness? Where there's fear, would You give me trust? Where there's selfishness, would You give me love? Where there's impurity, would You bring holiness into my life? Where there is hardness, O Lord, break it. Give me a tender heart towards You and others. I don't want simply to control what comes out of me. I want You to transform what is within me so that whatever comes out of my life will increasingly reflect Jesus and the goodness of God in me.

Perhaps this morning, the question that we end with is: Jesus, what needs to change in me? And when He shows us, let's not defend those positions or even hide them. let's just surrender it to Him and say, "Lord, here it is. This is mine, Lord. I've carried it for far too long. I give it to you." And in that space, would You do a transforming work in me? Would You change my heart, because to be Your follower is not about becoming better at hiding things that are wrong in me. It's about allowing You, Lord Jesus, to enter the deepest places of my heart and making it new.

Amen.
