

Matthew 15:1-20

"Truth Trumps Tradition"

In Matt 15 we continue to find Jesus in conflict w/His enemies. They're tied to the *traditions of man*; He tries to tear *down* those traditions that they might see the *truth* of *God*. & It's interesting isn't it, how these things (truth & tradition) can so often come into conflict w/one another? & Even more so how difficult it can be to let go of *tradition* so that we might learn the *truth*!

I find that often times we can hide behind our traditions. & We feel as though we're ok w/God as long as we do these certain things. Some churches have traditions about the order of their service; when they have a song, when they stand, when they sit, when they read, how the congregation responds, where the message is inserted. Some churches have traditions concerning when they take communion. Some, every week. Us, (typically) once a month. But people can begin to identify w/their traditions rather than the truth of God's word. Traditionally churches have a song service before their bible study. I'm not sure of any N.T. command to facilitate a service that way, but it's what we *traditionally* do. **Now those things in & of themselves (when we take communion, how our services are structured) aren't a problem. But if we begin to identify our standing before God on the premise of those things (meaning I haven't really opened my heart before God, but I'm all good because I sat through the service, partook of communion, adhered to the traditions...) then they become a problem.**

Why? Because the *traditions of man* appeal to who we are/what we do *outwardly*. The *truth of God's word* deals w/who we are *inwardly*. & God is infinitely more concerned w/who you are & what's happening w/you *inwardly*, than He is your ability to conform to standards & traditions *outwardly*. **We're going to say it, later on you'll see it, "The heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart."** It's easy to hide behind tradition, but God wants there to be truth (Ps 51:6) in the *inward* parts, & in that which is *hidden* (the heart) He wants you to know wisdom.

Vs 1-2

One thing you discover as you read through the gospel records is that Jesus wasn't generally a very "traditional" fella. He was all about truth, not so much about tradition. Now that's not to say that every tradition is a bad thing. **You may have Christmas traditions, or certain family traditions (even church traditions) & in & of themselves there's no harm no foul w/any of it. The problem enters in when we begin to equate our spiritual standing before God on the basis of it.**

What we're seeing here in Matt 15 is an official delegation coming from Jerusalem to make an investigation (through a bit of an interrogation) of Jesus & His ministry; & of course their official position is one of condemnation.

Let's remember that up to this point, most of Jesus' ministry had been in the region of Galilee which is a considerable distance to the north of Jerusalem (about a 4-5-day journey on foot). & Even though the Pharisees have already given their evaluation of His ministry back in Ch 9 & again in Ch 12 when they said that He received His power from Satan (casting out demons by the ruler of demons) His popularity has continued to rise among the people. **So what we're seeing here in Ch 15 are the "big guns" coming down from Jerusalem, again not to try & validate His ministry, but to assess His words/works so that they might find fault & discredit His ministry. They're looking for the proverbial "fly in the ointment".**

The fault they find? "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders in that they don't wash their hands before they eat bread?" Now don't misunderstand this. They aren't saying, "Why don't Your disciples care about hygiene?" This question has nothing to do w/hygiene. It has everything to do w/ceremonial washings received by tradition. (Nothing that was commanded is scripture mind you, but handed down by the elders).

Now to you & me it sounds sorta silly. But trust me when I tell you that to *them* it was a *major* problem. It was bad enough that they ministered & mingled among the outcasts. But then to not observe the rigid, extensive rituals for purification before a meal was unconscionable/inconceivable! Even to this day the orthodox Jew has a way in which they will wash their hands ensuring purification from that which is unclean. & You'll see these little stations (sinks w/corresponding pitchers & such) in Israel in bathrooms or in some dining rooms & places like that.

& We could talk about the way that they would wash their hands but suffice it to say it was an exact, rigid ritual by which they would ceremonially wash in order to "ensure" that they were clean (that is free from defilement).

& In asking Jesus this question they were forcing Him to deal w/the very foundation of their religious faith. If He was in fact rejecting the sacred traditions of the nation, then He was a heretic & as such could be discredited in the eyes of the people.

Where did these traditions come from? they had been handed down from teachers in past generations. They were originally recognized as the "oral law" which the rabbis said Moses gave to the elders, & they passed them down to the nation.

Eventually they were written down in what's called the Mishnah which unfortunately became even more important & authoritative than did the law itself. Because you have the law, then you have the clarification (you see) of the law. In other words, even though the law didn't state it, someone said, "Well, this is what it meant." Then they would honor what someone said about it, more than what it said. But the fact is, God never said that they were to wash their hands in such & such a way. But they got to where they honored those traditions over the truth (that's what Jesus is getting ready to deal with).

Vs 3

You start asking Jesus questions bringing accusation & condemnation you're entering the intellectual "big leagues" 😊. & It was very common that Jesus would answer a question (from His accusers) w/a question. In this case they accused Him, so He accused them. & He accused them *strongly*. Why? Because when they declared people unclean because they didn't adhere to traditional trivialities they were denying them access to God. They were telling them that they weren't clean before God (because they hadn't adhered to tradition) therefore God wouldn't hear them, or be near them, or respond to them. Because they were unclean/in sin... you see? So this is a big deal!

But He immediately places their priorities in the proper perspective doesn't He? "You want to talk to *Me* about violating the traditions of *men*? I want to talk to *you* about violating the word of *God*!" He's telling them that truth always trumps tradition.

It's true that when God had Moses build the tabernacle that there were special lavers (basins) made by which Aaron & his sons (the priesthood) were to wash their hands & feet before entering the tabernacle. However the reminder was that they were to be clean when they came into the presence of God. Not physically (though yes, hygiene is important) it was pointing to the necessity of a clean heart. As the psalmist said, "*Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart,*"¹ You see? One points to the other, you can't have clean hands apart from a pure heart & you can't have a pure heart apart from clean hands. So the idea of washing the hands (scripturally) was to keep the constant reminder before you that God required a clean heart, a washing of the heart.

Much like the rite of circumcision. It was never about the removal of the flesh physically. It was pointing to a cutting away of the flesh spiritually.

¹ The New King James Version. (1982). [Ps 24:3-4]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

That you wouldn't follow after the flesh, but would walk in the Spirit. But eventually Israel got to where they had exchanged the reality for the ritual. Because you can wash your hands a certain way ceremonially, & still have a defiled heart spiritually. **You can be circumcised physically & still be driven by the impulses of your sin nature inwardly. But you feel like your right w/God because you've been circumcised, you wash your hands ceremonially, you're going through all the motions but in reality your heart is far from Him... Notice.**

Vs 4-6

In other words, "Your wicked heart has found a way to completely disobey the word of God & feel completely spiritual & justifiable while doing it!" People are always looking for loopholes to get around the clear cut teaching of the word of God. Somehow because we go to church or maybe one day want to get married it's ok if we sleep together now... No, it's not! There's no justifiable loophole to sin in our lives.

Jesus takes their accusation & gives them an illustration of how they use a tradition to mask their twisted hearts & sin against God in not obeying His word. It was a practice known as "Corban". Here's the short of it, if you dedicated anything to God you're released from using it to benefit anyone else.

The word "Corban" means "a gift". Here's the scenario. In Jesus' day they didn't have retirement plans, there were no real investment strategies for the common man, no 401k or 403b options. You weren't going to place any money in a Roth IRA or draw on social security. **So when you got too old to take care of yourself, or if perhaps you were a widow & had no husband to take care of you, you were reduced essentially to nothing. Therefore God had established in His word (one of the 10 commandments, yes?) that children were to honor their mother & father.**

One of the ways they were expected to do that is that when they could no longer work or take care of themselves their children were to bear the responsibility (if they could) of providing for their parents in their old age. **Paul speaks to this in 1st Timothy Ch 5. Well, somewhere down the line the Rabbis came up w/an "escape clause" allowing you to keep your money, or your property/possessions & not help out your parents & still feel spiritual by declaring your goods to be "Corban".**

So, I declare that my house, my goods & all that I own belong to God. Now, even though I keep it all & have it all at my disposal, (perhaps it's to be donated to the temple when I die) but I can't help you because that would be taking from God.

Do you see how that works? “I’d love to help you mom, but this stuff isn’t mine anymore... it belongs to God...” So I get to *feel* real spiritual having given all to God, but I get to *be* real carnal because now I don’t have to give anything to you. I get to deprive my parents & feel justified in the process.

You see, in a technical way I haven’t violated the command because “it’s not mine to give...” So I get to completely disregard the clear teaching of the word of God & still feel even more religious all through the glorious tradition of Corban. But Jesus is saying, “Hey, God has a heart for families. & If your tradition disannuls your responsibility to your family than your tradition is wrong!”

But do you see how tradition can *mask* what Jesus is seeking to *unmask*? It’s not that I need to conform on the outside (adhere to traditions). It’s that I need to be *transformed* on the inside. Tradition serves as a mask that I can hide behind. I can put on a spiritual pretense through tradition. Think of it like this, “The tradition of man will hide my heart, the truth of God will expose my heart.”

Vs 7-9

We say it all the time around here. 1 Samuel 16:7, “...for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”² We can go through the motions all we like. & The truth is that there are times that we fit in this same hypocritical context. **We come to church, we’re worried about what people might think if we just stand there, so we sing, we lift our voices, maybe even our hands & we appear to be drawing near to God. & We are!...** With our lips, but our heart isn’t turned toward Him, tuned *into* Him, not really, not genuinely. We’re *acting* the part; hypocrites. We want the *image* of being near to God *outwardly*, but our heart is far from Him, you see?

We talk about love, but don’t really love. We talk about witnessing but don’t ever witness, we talk about forgiving, but don’t forgive... It’s an act, hypocrisy. We can so easily fall into the trap of honoring God w/our lips, but He wants our life, our heart.

Listen, everything about your relationship w/God stems from the heart. **(List out) We Believe In The Heart (Rom. 10:9–10), We Love From The Heart (Matt. 22:37), We Obey From The Heart (Rom. 6:17; Eph. 6:6), We Sing From The Heart (Col. 3:16), and We Give From The Heart (2 Cor. 9:7).**

Now again, Jesus didn’t say that all tradition is bad. Nor did He say that all traditions are good. They simply need to have their proper priority & be in the proper perspective.

² The New King James Version. (1982). (1 Sa 16:7). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Let's not deceive ourselves so as to place the traditions of man on par w/the word of God. Big difference between tradition & truth. Tradition is external, God's truth is internal. Obeying tradition pleases men, obeying the Word pleases God. **Tradition deals w/ritual, God's truth deals w/reality. Tradition brings empty words to the lips, truth penetrates the heart & changes the life. Tradition is something you keep, the truth of the word of God keeps you.**

& Listen, Jesus didn't say that it's ok to elevate tradition as long as you're sincere when you do it. We have a responsibility to the word of God. People can look for loopholes all they want. But even though Christianity is a rational faith & it's a reasonable faith, none of us will get to heaven head 1st. We enter the kingdom heart 1st.

Vs 10-11

Having dealt directly w/the religious leaders He now turns to the multitudes to instruct them about genuine, authentic godliness. & The gist is this, don't think that by washing your hands *physically* that will in some way keep you clean *spiritually*. You're not defiled by what goes *into* your mouth, your defiled condition is made evident by what comes *out of your mouth*... & Jesus will expand upon this in a moment but understand that what goes into your mouth (whatever you may eat, be it w/ceremonially clean hands or not) will go *through* you. But what comes *out of your mouth* reveals a defiled or corrupted heart that's embedded w/*in* you.

& When I say "you" I'm speaking to all of mankind in general. It's the condition of every man apart from Christ. That's God's evaluation of humanity. Jeremiah 17:9, **"The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked;"**³ Literally, "incurably sick", the heart (the inner person) of every man is defiled, full of all manner of wickedness & that's made manifest by the things that pour forth from our mouths.

Tradition can mask that for you, make you feel good about yourself even though things in your heart/life aren't right & need to be addressed, confronted & turned from. That's where the truth of God's word comes in, we need God's word to expose our heart, so we can see our need (again not to be conformed to rules & regulations but to be transformed by the Spirit of God, receiving new life in Christ).

Now I should say this, context is critical here. Jesus isn't saying that we can't take anything into us that can defile us (be it something like pornography through the eye gate, vulgarity/blasphemy through the ear gate, even drugs or alcohol through the mouth, or the nose or injections or whatever.)

³ The New King James Version. (1982). [Je 17:9]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

He's speaking w/in the context of a kosher diet (& really preparing them for the new covenant whereby He will free them from dietary laws altogether). **He's saying that touching something unclean & not ceremonially washing before you eat won't defile you before God. Because that's something outward & physical. God is concerned that we be clean concerning the inward/spiritual (the heart).**

Vs 12-14

"Man, Jesus you really ticked them off!" Your words *offended* them. Can I tell you something? The word of God can be offensive. As the word penetrates our pretense that can make us mad sometimes! But let me say this as well. When we're sharing, if someone is offended, let's make sure it's the word of God doing the offending & not our attitude or recklessness in how we share, amen? We want people to hear the gospel & be saved.

But notice Jesus didn't say, "Well let's argue w/them or prove our point to them." There was no debating them or arguing w/them. Jesus just said, "Hey, leave them alone." Some of the most terrifying words Jesus could ever say about someone. "Just leave them alone." He knew that they'd resolved their position in their own minds/hearts & wouldn't be deterred...

He speaks of the fact that since they're not planted (established) *by* God, that ultimately they'll fall under the judgment *of* God. They'll be "uprooted". But notice it won't be because God will send lightning bolts from heaven, but rather because He will give them over to the end of their own ways (being blind they will fall into a ditch, into the pit).

Often times we perceive God's judgment as some radical overthrow or show of misfortune upon them. But the bible teaches that the wrath of God is in reality (more times than not) revealed in simply giving a person over to their own ways... You don't want to walk in God's ways? That's fine. You can walk in your own, & receive the end thereof. (Write it down, look it up Rom 1:18-32)

Vs 15-20

Peter is all, "Lord, could You expound on that just a little more?" Why? Because he's kosher. Jesus just said, "Eat what you want, that's not the issue." But they're pretty sure it's a huge issue! & It wouldn't be until Acts 10 that Peter would finally understand that it's not food that God is worried about, it's the human heart!

But in Vs 16 Jesus asks a great question. One we do well to reflect on, "Are you still w/out understanding." Jesus wants you to know & understand His word; His ways! Think about it, what part of my walk w/God am I still struggling really understanding?

Because if we can identify it, we can address it & grow in it. We're all still a work in progress, look to grow in & understand the ways, the word of God.

Then Jesus shares what we spoke of earlier & gives us a spiritual X-ray of the human heart. He says, "Listen, whatever you eat just passes through you physically, it doesn't really effect you spiritually. What enters your mouth doesn't *effect* your heart (spiritually), but what comes out of your mouth finds it's root, it's beginning *in* your heart."

So the purity that God calls for starts not on the outside, but on the inside. It's interesting that Jesus doesn't blame the devil for evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, lying & blasphemies. He says that these are the evils that reside in our innermost unredeemed nature.

It's why we can't be made right w/God through reformation & tradition. We need transformation & regeneration. It's not about reforming our old heart, but receiving a new heart altogether. We're born w/a wicked heart. That's why the bible declares we have to be "born again" by the Spirit of God.

The emphasis should never be upon the external, but upon the internal. Murder, lies, adulteries, fornications, thefts... all these things are the fruit of sin. But it's the heart, therein lies the *root* of sin. *If there were no sin in you, sin would never come out of you. You might think that person made you angry, no. The anger was already there (in your heart), that person just gave it the opportunity to come out.*

What's the remedy? It's not a new president 😊, better education, social reform... Ezekiel 36:26, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you;"*⁴ The heart is purified by faith, we're washed in the living waters of the word of God. Don't look to traditions, meditate on the truth of God's word, get God's word in your heart & put it into practice in your life. Amen? Amen.

Prayer Points:

Search us, O God, and know our hearts; Try us, and know our anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in us, And lead us in the way everlasting. May we be students of Your word, doers of Your word, a people who bring You glory to the praise of Your name.

Perhaps God has spoken to you today. It's not religion you need, it's a relationship w/the Living God. The problems aren't around us, they're w/in us. God wants to give you a brand new heart today. Believe on the Lord J.C. who has loved you & given Himself for you & though your sin is like scarlet you'll leave here white as snow, pure before Him. Not because of what you do, but by faith in what He's done for you upon the cross, paying the price for your sin that you might find forgiveness in Him.

⁴ The New King James Version. (1982). [Eze 36:26]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.