

# ***“Who You Really Are”***

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***The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees is the direction of contamination.***

***Matthew 15:1-20***

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## ***Traditions and their sources***

My humbling thought yesterday morning as I thought about the Pharisees is how many ways there are for sincere people to get religion wrong. And how when you take it upon yourself to teach others, as James 3:1 says, you open yourself to stricter judgment from God. In round numbers, if I have preached and taught 2,000 times and an average of 500 people have been influenced by them, I’ve had one million opportunities to lead others astray.

The good news about faith is that there is one simple test to determine whether your beliefs and practices are headed in the right direction. It’s all over the Bible from one end to the other, and I’ll name it at the end of this sermon.

Meanwhile, let’s not get too Pharisaical about the Pharisees, for several reasons. First, they were deeply sincere in their effort to study, practice, and teach God’s Word. They weren’t trying to get it wrong. Second, there was general consensus in their day that they were getting it right. Third, Jesus himself – who often clashed with them – said on at least one occasion that they “sit in Moses’ seat” and that his followers “must be careful to do everything they tell you to do” (Matthew 23:2). Finally, we need to be guarded in our criticism because we often do exactly what they were doing.

Suppose a woman walks into this sanctuary on a Sunday morning with an open can of beer and a lit cigarette. Is that OK with you? I’m guessing not. It’s not OK with me. But why not? There’s nothing in the Bible or in the church bylaws about drinking or smoking on the church campus – but it is in our policies and it offends our traditions.

I can give you many other examples. Don't run in the church building. Don't interrupt the pastor during the sermon. Men, remove your hats when you pray. Wear a mask in church. Don't shake hands or hug during a pandemic. Close your eyes when you pray. Read your Bible every day. Attend Sunday School. Don't take flash pictures during the Candlelighting service. Stand up for the Hallelujah Chorus. These are all time-honored traditions, and I'm a traditional guy so I like all of them. But they're not in the Bible and they are not (intentionally so) in our church constitution and bylaws.

Or how about this? What if athletes – or anyone, for that matter – refuse to stand for the national anthem? Is that OK with you? It's not with me, but why not? The rules about the Star Spangled Banner are not in the U.S. Constitution. They're in the U.S. Code, which is a summary of our nation's laws – but that document is 2,600 pages long (not including the IRS code). How many of us have even attempted to read or apply all those rules? So why is one very small section about the flag and the national anthem more important than all the rest?

If I've offended you by questioning rules about smoking in church or standing for the national anthem, you're ready for Matthew 15.

***Accusation (1-2) "They don't wash their hands!"***

The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees has been developing in Matthew's gospel since Jesus' advance man, John the Baptist, called them a "brood of vipers" (3:7). They have already been scheming to execute him (12:14). Matthew often groups them with "the teachers of the law" (aka "scribes") and sometimes with the "Sadducees," the aristocrats who ran the temple. What all of them had in common was greater access to the Scriptures than the common person had, and a passion to study, practice, teach, and enforce what the Bible says. In their own minds, they were the ardent practitioners and defenders of God's Word.

Primarily centered in Jerusalem, these legal scholars and enforcers might travel if needed to other Jewish population centers like Galilee about 70 miles away. They were bringing the favor of not only explaining what the Bible says but what to do about it. A consensus had emerged over several centuries about which of the 613 laws in the Torah were most important and how to apply them. It was at that time for the most part an "oral tradition," codified later in the Mishnah and Talmud, but the job of a rabbi or synagogue leader or father, for that matter, was to explain and apply as best he could the collected wisdom of the sages. If someone – particularly someone with a large following – began to openly challenge accepted practices, the legal experts and Pharisees would correct that person privately or, if necessary, publicly.

In verse 2 their question is simple but not innocent. For them it was very much like asking, "Why are you smoking in church?" or "Why don't you stand for the national anthem?" They frame their question, correctly, not as one of Scripture but of the

“tradition of the elders.” Every Jewish man, woman, and child knew that hands must be ceremonially washed before eating food.

They knew perfectly well that this was not in the Bible, but that wasn’t the point. The book of Leviticus says nothing about washing your hands before you eat, but it says much – to us, monotonously and obsessively much – about purity. This is a holy people, and they need to be very careful not to touch unclean things or do unclean things or eat unclean things. If they do, intentionally or unintentionally – because sometimes it’s unavoidable – there are two primary remedies: time and water. Even though washing hands before you eat isn’t mentioned in Leviticus, everybody knew that you never know when you might have touched something unclean. So just to be sure, and just to honor God and tradition, take the extra step and run ritually clean water over your hands first.

It’s a no-brainer. “Jesus, why do your disciples not do that?”

***Comeback (3-9) “You nullify the word of God.”***

Jesus doesn’t answer their question. Matthew’s gospel never addresses that specific question – not only about the handwashing rules but about other rules relating to cleanliness. Later on, the apostles will wrestle with this issue.

For now, Jesus simply points out their inconsistency. His word is “Hypocrites!” (7). In some cases, their oral tradition and/or practice had created loopholes when strict obedience to the Law was inconvenient or costly. “Honor your father and your mother” is in the Ten Commandments. They didn’t have a social safety net for senior citizens, so the care of elderly parents fell solely on their adult children. If you had a home and/or savings and investments, your obvious duty was to use it in the care of your parents.

But the more money you have, the more you want to preserve it or even grow it. So they had created a system that would protect their assets. With one word one (“Korban!”) they could declare, “This has been dedicated to God” and it was an irreversible decision. Not even your parents or a court could force you to spend it.

The loophole was you could still keep it and control it. It was like setting up a trust or writing it into your last will and testament. Meanwhile, your parents could starve to death or wander the streets homeless, but you couldn’t help them because your resources had already been set apart for the Holy One.

Jesus says in this case their tradition, their practice, had overridden the very clear biblical command to honor your parents. To emphasize that he was not discarding the Torah or the writings, Jesus quotes from Isaiah: “He was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules’” (7-9).

***Parable (10-11) “What comes out of their mouth defiles them.”***

As best we can tell, the Pharisees had pulled Jesus away from the crowd to confront him about the handwashing. It’s hard to tell their motivation for doing so. Jesus has likewise responded only to the delegation of scribes and Pharisees, but he now decides that his greater point needs a greater audience. Just like with the chapter of parables, he addresses a larger “crowd” (13:1) and just like in chapter 13, the focus is on listening and understanding. The Greek word for “understand” means to “synthesize” – to connect the dots. “Listen,” he says to the crowd, “so I can put all this together for you.”

Here’s what he says: “It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles but what comes out of the mouth.” Peter will later (15) call this a “parable.” The word just means an analogy, maybe a proverb.

***Confusion (12) “Did you know the Pharisees were offended?”***

The Pharisees understood. They knew exactly his point, that they had missed the point of the Law. That all of their expositions and applications, well-intentioned though they might be, led them and those who listened to them astray.

I love the question by the disciples in verse 12: “Did you know the Pharisees were offended?” What did they expect Jesus to say? “Oh, I didn’t know that. Oh, my! Where are they? I should go apologize to them. I wonder how I could reword that so it would be less offensive.”

No, that isn’t what Jesus said. On the other hand, we shouldn’t assume that Jesus or Matthew here gives us permission to offend people, that we’re being Jesus-like when we make others mad or win an argument.

***Coaching (13-14) “What comes from the heart is what defiles.”***

Instead, Jesus reminds the disciples that God is the ultimate divider and the only judge. He uproots weeds among the wheat. It’s his job, not ours. This greatly helps me when I think other teachers and movements go astray. More harm has been done in the cause of Christ by trying to use swords or even words to do God’s job than by just allowing bad teaching to go away. To be sure, there’s a time to confront and challenge, but more often than not you just let God deal with it.

Jesus’ advice is to let blind guides lead willfully blind people into their own pit.

***Teaching (15-20) “What comes from the heart is what defiles.”***

Peter now wants clarification of the “parable.” The reference is back to verse 11. Jesus had said that it’s not what goes into your mouth that defiles; it’s what comes out. I don’t know if his meaning is obvious to you, but it wasn’t to Peter.

In the *New International Version* Jesus' reply to Peter reads like a putdown. "Are you still so dull?" *The Message* says, "Are you being willfully stupid?" I don't think that's what Jesus means to say.

"Dull" is the negative form of the same Greek word in verse 10 – the one that means to synthesize or connect the dots. "Are you still not putting all this together?" Jesus asks. "OK, let me clarify some more."

In verse 12 *The Message* is a little crude but accurate. "Don't you know that anything that is swallowed works its way through the intestines and is finally defecated?" In other words, what you eat winds up in the toilet.

Jesus then adds, "But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them."

Don't start analyzing the biology of what Jesus says – he certainly knows that your digestive system draws nutrients and can even draw poison. He also knows that the circulation system is separate from the digestive system. Stay with the analogy.

"For out of the heart come (and all of these words are plural in Greek) – evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, false testimonies, and blasphemies." The Pharisees and Jesus agreed that all of these were sins. Even if we disagree about what constitutes sexual sin or false testimony, most people would agree most of the time. Few will say, "I'm in favor of murders and adulteries and blasphemies."

The point is in verse 20 as Jesus wraps up his teaching. The issue all along has been what *defiles* a person. The Greek verb here is the one from which we get the noun *koinonia*. We use *koinonia* positively, meaning "fellowship." What's behind it is the word "common" – what we have in common, what unites us. The verb *koino'o* means to turn something that is sacred or special into something common.

To follow my earlier analogy, if you use the American flag to wipe the floor, you defiled its meaning. You treated an important piece of cloth like it's a rag. If you turn this sanctuary into a smoking lounge and a bar, you polluted it. That was exactly how the Pharisees saw it when people ate without washed hands. They defiled the body.

Both the Pharisees and Jesus wanted people to be clean. The radical and critical difference is the direction of contamination. The Pharisees believed that the law taught that contamination is from the outside in. Jesus said contamination is from the inside out. If what's inside of you is rotten, then what comes out of you will destroy yourself and others.

It's why I resist for all I'm worth the idea that morality can be determined by what feels right at the moment. We did need an objective guide, which is Scripture.

### ***It's about the heart***

I said at the beginning of the sermon that at the end of it I would give you the simple test of whether your beliefs and behaviors are headed in the right direction.

The test is your heart. In this we don't have to pit Jesus against Moses or Paul vs. Isaiah. From one end of the Bible – 725 times, 60 out of 66 Bible books – there are teachings about and references to the heart.

God is most interested in your heart. He wants your heart. Not literally, of course, as in the ticker inside your chest. It's a metaphor – “parable” in the language of this chapter – for a personal connection, a relationship, an interpersonal attachment.

This is what Jesus wants you to synthesize, the dots he wants you to connect, the reason that worship matters, this sanctuary matters, the Bible matters, your generosity matters, justice matters, Lent matters. The only reason any of that matters is because your heart matters. And if your heart's not in the right place, none of it matters.

In saying that, we're saying what matters far less.

Your heart matters more than your reputation. It's not that your reputation doesn't matter. “By their fruit you will know them,” Jesus said in Matthew 7. But people can misjudge you unfairly. Maybe I've been watching and reading too much Jane Austen, but like Mr. Darcy. Even more common is the rotten heart masked by a phony reputation – the person everyone thinks is so pious and generous but is truly self-serving and even malicious.

Your heart matters more than your actions. The fundamental flaw of the Pharisees – that there's a checklist for behavior that makes you acceptable to God – has been repeated throughout generations and even among Christians. When I was growing up, the check list was go to church, don't dance or drink, read your Bible, witness to your friends. Progressive churches, fundamentalist churches, even Corinth, there is an explicit or maybe implicit checklist in almost any religious community.

If you buy into the checklist, there are two consistent results. The first is pride – condescension and criticism toward those who don't do what you do. The second is hypocrisy. You don't worry about honoring your parents because you're ceremonially washing your hands before every meal.

Your heart is who you really are. The question to ask if you're wondering if your actions please God, if your priorities are where they should be, if your worship and giving and service and witness are the kind that honor God is this: “Do I want them to be? Is the greatest desire of my life to be in relationship with him and delight him?” If the answer is yes, the other answers will fall into place. Amen.