

Sunday, May 2, 2021
Matthew 15:1-20 (Unwarranted Tradition)
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Intro

Scripture calls us to think and feel rightly.

Sometimes interesting behavioral norms take hold in Christian culture. In your day surely you've seen battles over movies, cards, dancing, wine, suits, hats, music style. Have you ever asked yourselves why? Have you ever deeply searched the Bible for an answer?

One church had a campaign to raise \$25,000 for the organ fund. Presented like a guarantee of faithfulness and orthodoxy. Maintaining the organ would protect the church from worldly worship. Where did they get that from? In the OT, I see crashing cymbals and stringed instruments, not to mention loud shouting and dance (Ps 33:2-3; 150:4-5). I don't share this because I have visions of radically altering our music. I share this to illustrate how churches can forbid what the Bible commends in the name of faithfulness.

I also share this to illustrate how churches can have a preoccupation with externals while neglecting internals. Music style and instruments used become the mark of godliness. Picking the right instruments makes us godly and faithful. Where does that leave those who use a guitar and drums? Well, they must be unfaithful and worldly. When this happens the tendency is to associate godliness with external forms. The inner life, the heart, is neglected because doing the right things and refraining from the wrong things is enough.

In such cases, traditions intended to prevent deviation from Scripture may create a "godliness" that deviates from Scripture. Let's consider Jesus' teaching on the matter.

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

Confrontation serves as an opportunity to instruct

FCF: replacing God's word with human traditions...neglect of internal purity

Gospel connection: faith leads to changed desires

Point 1: Beware of prioritizing manmade traditions over Scripture (15:1-9)

Explanation

The Pharisees and scribes initiate debate with Jesus. They ask: *"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat (15:2)."* Tradition of the elders = extra-biblical laws devised by the Pharisees to ensure that God's law would never be violated. These laws were transferred orally in Jesus' day, and later in the 2nd century were written down in the Mishnah. The Pharisees' tradition was being broken by Jesus' disciples, not OT law. The priests had laws for burnt offerings and there were general laws when one came into contact with the dead or lepers (Exod 30:18-21; 40:30-32; Lev 22:4-7).

Jesus answers the Pharisees and scribes with a rebuke in the form of a question: *"And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition (15:3)?"* The Pharisees and scribes broke the command to *"Honor your father and your mother"* (see Exod 20:12). The command was so important that, *"Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die"* (see Exod 21:17). They broke the law by teaching, *"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 (15:5-6)."*

Detailing the same episode, **Mark 7:12** says, "then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother,"

This tradition was practiced in such a way that someone pledged their money to the temple, meaning their money went to the temple when they died. They were free to use money for personal use, but they couldn't transfer money to their parents, because their money belonged to God. In effect, their vow to God prevented them from caring for their parents. A loophole to neglect their parents.

Note the phrase "your tradition" in 15:3, 6 = not from God. Their tradition voided God's word (15:6). One was free to reject God's command to honor father and mother. A manmade tradition overruled God's word! Any tradition that contradicts God's word, when rightly interpreted, must be rejected. I say, "when rightly interpreted," because we must be cautious not to be rash in our conclusions. We must carefully consider everything the Scripture has to say about a matter. Here we see that God's word regulates the practice of God's people.

In 15:7-9, Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites, comparing them to the unfaithful in Isaiah's day. Hypocrite = an actor on a stage. Someone who pretends to be something they are not. The Pharisees worshipped God externally (lips), but not internally (heart). Their worship opposed God's authority. They thought they were worshippers. In reality, they were rebels.

Heart = our inner life = thoughts, desires, emotions.

When it says Isaiah prophesied about the Pharisees and scribes it doesn't mean Isaiah was speaking of a future day when Jesus would arrive on the scene. Isaiah was concerned with the hypocrites of his day. But what Isaiah said about the hypocrites of his day is true of the Pharisees and the scribes.

Worship is more than physical action! God cares about our heart. More on that in our second point.

Application

Jesus confronted erroneous traditions originated by unbelievers. We might not be hypocrites under God's judgment, but we may attempt to enforce traditions Scripture doesn't require. This passage prompts the question, what is the criteria for our traditions? Simple answer: God's word.

We need to ask the question, do we have blind spots? Do we assume certain things are true without careful Bible study? Do we look at one verse and jump to rash conclusions? Do we consider the surrounding context? Do we consider the storyline of Scripture? Do we consider the doctrines of Scripture? Do we consider everything Scripture has to say about the matter? Do we blindly accept traditions or practices passed on to us without asking why? Are we blind to manmade traditions that conflict with Scripture?

Church history is littered with blind spots. Like slavery. William Wilberforce got it. Wilberforce successfully labored for the abolition of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery itself in Britain. John Newton, composer of *Amazing Grace*, got it. He served as the captain of a slave ship and later repented and worked with Wilberforce for abolition, calling the African slave trade "a commerce so iniquitous, so cruel, so oppressive, so destructive (John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance*, 50)."

However, the Southern Baptists didn't get it. Scripture explicitly condemns kidnapping (1 Tim 1:10), so why were they so ignorant? Shaped by culture. Rejecting slavery would come at personal costs. They went to Scripture looking for what they wanted to find. Blinded by tradition. In 2018 the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a school I have a Master of Theology from, issued this statement:

"The founding faculty of this school—all four of them—were deeply involved in slavery and deeply complicit in the defense of slavery. Many of their successors on this faculty, throughout the period of Reconstruction and well into the twentieth century, advocated segregation, the inferiority of African-Americans, and openly embraced the ideology of the Lost Cause of southern slavery."

What's my point? We can be blind to unbiblical practices. What some see as obvious others fail to see.

How about a positive example? Jay Adams founded the Biblical Counseling movement. His 1970 book, *Competent to Counsel*, details his journey. As a pastor, Adams found himself without counseling training and unable to minister to hurting people. He was disillusioned with the standard psychology books that were up front about how few people were actually helped by their counseling, and their advice failed to help his people. The common practice was sending counselees to psychiatrists or state mental institutions. But he wondered how a pastor could be justified in sending his people to receive non-Christian counsel. Adams began using Scripture

directly and he discovered more people were helped. However, his methods were haphazard. At Westminster Theological Seminary, he was tasked with teaching a basic theory of pastoral counseling and he discovered the Bible has much to say about counseling people with problems. Reading psychiatric literature, Adams discovered that psychiatrists called sin disease or sickness, and removed personal responsibility. He wondered, could the books be wrong?

So in the summer of 1965 he worked at two mental institutions in Illinois where he sat under a non-Christian research professor, O. Hobart Mowrer. Mowrer was a revolutionary who helped people by confessing behavior (not to God) and taking personal responsibility. Mowrer offered a moral model in place of a medical model where sinful behavior was a health issue. During his training, Adams discovered that most people were there because of their failure to deal with life's problems. The inmates were sinful not sick. The medical models eliminated responsibility and didn't help people with guilt. The experience drove Adams to ask the question,

“What do the Scriptures say about such people and the solution to their problems?” – *Competent to Counsel*, xvi

Adam's experience led him to conclude that people are helped by God's word, and that Scripture reveals how to help sinners. Adams wrote,

“All concepts, terms and methods used in counseling need to be re-examined biblically. Not one thing can be accepted from the past (or the present) without biblical warrant.” – *Competent to Counsel*, xviii

What did Adams have to do before he got closer to biblical practice? He had to question the prevailing counseling practice. He had to look to Scripture to inform his practice.

Point 2: Beware of focusing on external behavior while neglecting the heart (15:10-20)

Explanation

Jesus calls his disciples to him for a more private conversation saying, *"it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person (15:11)."* The disciples are concerned the Pharisees are offended, but Jesus isn't concerned: *"Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit (15:13-14)."*

In other words, the Father hasn't planted the Pharisees and scribes. They are not from God. Someone else has planted them = Satan. They're blind. They don't know God. So avoid them and disregard their teaching. Whoever follows them will fall in a pit = symbolic for divine judgment. Don't be led by the blind!

The disciples were confused (15:16-17). A person isn't defiled by eating something and expelling it through the bowels (15:17). Eating is simply a natural process of the human body as designed by God.

On the other hand, sins that arise from the heart (evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander) do defile a person (15:19-20). Sin flows from a corrupt heart, "*But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone (15:20).*" The Pharisees and scribes were blind in that they obsessed on external behaviors God didn't actually forbid while neglecting the sins of the heart. Hypocrites neglect the inner life.

The Pharisees and scribes thought failure to wash hands defiled Jesus' disciples = ritually unclean before God. Jesus says a corrupt heart that produces sinful thoughts, words, and deeds is what defiles a person. Internal corruption defiles. Jesus hinted at changes to come under the new covenant.

Application

First, don't be led by the blind = examine the resources that feed your soul. Ignore false teachers. Reject them. Avoid their teachings.

- 1) Do they contain Scripture?
- 2) If so, do they twist it out of context?
- 3) Do they embrace religions or philosophies directly contrary to Scripture (e.g. New Age)?
- 4) Do they teach things directly contrary to Scripture?
- 5) Do they leave out gospel basics?

I'm not saying we can't read from non-Christian sources. We should be able to engage the issues of our day. We should be a thinking people who bring Scripture to bear on today's world. But don't use false teachers to feed your soul.

Second, when we have a preoccupation with externals (movies, cards, dancing, wine) while neglecting internals (thought life, life goals, what we functionally worship, what we functionally trust in) we've missed the mark. Do we neglect matters of the heart?

Back to the biblical counseling movement. The ongoing fruit after Jay Adams wrote *Competent to Counsel* in 1970 was a movement that improved on Jay's methodology.

They distinguished between sin and suffering. Is the person troubled by sins committed against them, the consequences of their own sins, effects of the curse, or by unbiblical thinking?

They anchored people in God's truth, but without platitudes. They realized the human soul isn't mechanical. There's no one size fits all approach to a person's suffering. They ministered with compassion not stoicism. More relational. Less authoritative. They sought detailed and specific repentance.

They went beyond commands and external behavior. In agreement with Jesus, they focused on the human heart. They got to the motives behind the behavior. They realized that what we worship drives our actions. We're all ruled by something. Are we ruled by God or something else? We all trust in something. Is it God we're trusting in?

They realized that idolatry flows from a sinful, self-exalting heart. We go astray when we indulge in our own desires rather than delighting in God. We go astray when we desire to exalt self above God and others. Worshipping self, wrong desires emerge in our heart. They focused on motive before behavior.

In agreement with Jesus, Heath Lambert says:

“A focus on motivational issues will be attentive to right behavior that is done for the wrong reasons. This kind of counseling will be more equipped to root out pharisaism and legalism.” – *The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams*

One fruit of the movement was applying what Jesus says in today’s passage. Behavior flows from the heart. So in order to correct behavior, we have to get at the heart. For example, parenting.

In parenting we don’t want to train children to live morally while unaffected by the gospel. There’s the danger of raising “disciples” who say all the right things and do all the right things, but have no heart for God. There’s the danger of spanking kids into defiant conformity. There’s the danger of kids doing the right things so they can get what they want, like video game rights. That’s obedience for selfish motives. Love for God isn’t on the mind. Love for neighbor, honoring father and mother, isn’t on the mind. Jesus says what we love drives everything we do. Our motives matter.

To unbelievers

God is concerned with your heart. The what and the why matter. We do what’s wrong because we desire what’s wrong. Christianity is a fundamental reordering of our desires. We come to see God is good. Jesus died to take the punishment for our sins. We come to see that God is wise. Jesus’ instructions are helpful to us whereas sin destroys. We trust in the person of Jesus, that he died for our sins, and we experience his forgiveness. Experiencing his forgiveness, we delight in him. Delighting in Jesus our desires change. And with changed desires we turn from sin. We follow Jesus because we believe he is good, we trust him, and we love him.

Conclusion

Beware of prioritizing manmade traditions over Scripture. Examine everything through the grid of Scripture.

Beware of focusing on external behavior while neglecting the heart. What we love drives our behavior.