

Matthew 15.2-20 | When purity makes dirty

Intro | Doing vs. Believing

We're spending the next several months in Matthew chapters 14-20, a study we've titled THE REVELATION of the KING. As the gospel according to Matthew unfolds, Jesus reveals his true identity as the Son of God, and his true mission to build His church. These chapters not only serve to reveal the heart of a gospel that saves, they also reveal the hearts of men who foolishly **believe they can save themselves**.

The gospel of John 6 records what happened after Jesus fed the five thousand and the disciples left in the boats and Jesus disappeared (soon the join the disciples by walking on water). Alone, the crowds got into their own boats and headed by to Jesus hometown of Capernaum. *When they found him on the other side fo the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you at your fill of the loaves. Do not labor [work] for food that perishes, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on Him (Jesus) God the Father has set his seal."* Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "**This is the work of God, that you believe in whom he has sent.**" John 6.22-29

This exchange reveals the heart of what I want share today. Desiring to have their physical hunger satisfied again, they are blind to how they are starving spiritually. When Jesus tells them that they need to pursue spiritual food in order to survive eternally, **they ask: "WHAT MUST WE DO?" This is the question that all men ask when confronted with their spiritual emptiness—it's the wrong question.** Everyone feels this God' shaped emptiness, it cannot be ignored. Some fill it with the gratification of irreligion; they avoid God by being really bad. Others, like the Pharisees, fill it with gratification of religion; they avoid God by being really good. Ironically, the Pharisees were zealous for God and His word—perhaps too much. More than scholars, the Pharisees wanted to apply the purity required of priests to all people. To this end, they were largely responsible for developing the synagogue as an institution in order to extend worship into everyday life. In doing this, the Pharisees didn't believe they were avoiding God; on the contrary, they are convinced they are pursuing godliness. **But you can be godly without God.** About this happening today, Pastor Larry Osbourne has written, *"I've found that becoming a modern-day, accidental Pharisee is a lot like eating at Denny's. No one wants to go there. We just end up there. And if a Pharisee can be "godly" without God, then we can probably be a "Christian" without Christ.*

Worship vs. Religion

This text reveals how this happens unintentionally, accidentally, but assuredly. The Pharisees and Scribes arrive from far way Jerusalem, an envoy ready to challenge the ministry of this uneducated Galilean peasant. Easily identified among the commoners of Capernaum, these men would have been honored with an invitation to eat with the teacher. As they prepare to eat, they cannot help but notice the shameful behavior of this leader's disciples—**they are not following the traditions of their elders and washing their hands.** The traditions of the "elders" refers to the collection of oral teaching that provided commentary on the Law. These traditions taught the different opinions of rabbis based on interpretations of the law. The Pharisees held these *traditions* to be nearly as authoritative as Scripture. Surprisingly, most of their traditions developed to honor Scripture, not usurp its authority. According to the law, there were several ways to become unclean by touching, even accidentally, certain persons or things. The washing of

hands of was precautionary as well as an active to declare their love for the Scripture! In other words, even though it was not biblically commanded, this practice was an act of worship to defend the Bible.

Tragically, their religious practice becomes false worship—the bible defenders become bible abusers. When the Pharisees condemn the disciples as, at best, lacking devotion to their faith and, at worst, lacking purity before God, **Jesus responds to their charges with a charge of his own.** Jesus declares that their love for their own man-made traditions has caused them to break God’s commandment. Referencing another tradition they practice, Jesus quotes the 5th commandment to *honor your Father and Mother* which commands what we ought to do AND he quotes from Exodus 21 which commands what we ought not to do, namely, *curse our Mother and Father.* **Jesus says they are guilty of both.** All Jews understood both of those commands to mean that they were to love and care for their parents—especially when they grew older. But human nature makes us greedy and selfish. **Wanting to uphold the law, but avoid the cost of it, they made a tradition creating a loophole to justify their disobedience.** By declaring their money to an “offering”, in their minds, they were legally permitted to withhold from their parents even if they planned to use it for something else later.

Calling them hypocrites, which means “pretenders”, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah (29.13), who warned Jews in Jerusalem hundreds of years earlier about the danger of false worship characterized by external rituals. Jesus condemns the Pharisees because the doctrines of God have become subordinate to the “doctrines” of men in their worship. If worship is our response, both personal and communal, to God for who He is, and what He has done; expressed in and by the things we say and the way we live—**then who God is, what He has done, and how they live is based on their own words. And even if they are good...they are not the word of God.** As one commentator wrote it, *“The Word from God is the core of worship. We often think of worship as what we DO toward God; but our text teaches that the fundamental component of worship is teaching FROM God to us. When we think of worship, we often think in the wrong direction.” (Frederick Bruner, 89)*

Tradition vs. Traditionalism

Jesus’ judgment not only calls into the question the legitimacy of their accusations; he also calls into the question the legitimacy of their worship all together. Intended for their traditions to help them honor God, they have dishonored Him and hurt others. **The WAY in which they worshipped became more important than the OBJECT of their worship.** There is an undeniable tension between tradition and traditionalism.

Now, not all rules and traditions are evil. There are some very meaningful practices both personally and corporately. In truth, the church would do well to learn, respect, even celebrate, the traditions of the historic church more. There are good fences that should last for a season or, for some, a lifetime. Even if they aren’t required for our lives, they are helpful to grow us when we are immature, and protect us when we are vulnerable. **Though we never want to elevate man-made traditions into doctrines, we also don’t want to deprecate the work of those who came before us.** We can learn and grow from the creeds, the confessions, even some of the practices of those who came before us. This is not only one way in which we honor our fathers and mothers; it is also a way in which we protect the purity of our own worship. **Proverbs 22.28 ²⁸ Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set.** In their right place, submitted to the Word, traditions have great value. One Christian scholar said it this way: **Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living** (Jaroslav Pelikan)

Traditionalism is when traditions go bad. Traditions won’t hurt us, but traditionalism will destroy our faith and the faith of others. **While it’s unlikely we will condemn someone for not washing their hands**

today, we have our own personal rituals and religious practices that we elevate, even passively, into doctrines—living traditions that hinder our relationship with the living God. Not everyone plays this game publicly, but everyone plays it out privately, sinfully calculating the godliness of ourselves and those around us. **Traditionalism is when something I do, makes me clean and keeps me clean before God and men, in addition to what Jesus has done.** In essence, we make new little laws to measure the righteousness of ourselves, and others (pride/despair) **It is also known as legalism.** We might think that this kind of practice is harmless. In addressing legalistic false teachers at Ephesus, Paul tells Timothy: **Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving (like bacon). We tend to minimize the danger of some of these little extra rules we add to the gospel; Paul calls this teaching of demons.**

Sometimes we attach righteousness to rules men make up, other times we attach them to God-made rules that no longer apply. Sometimes we attach righteousness to things like Bible reading, prayer, theology we hold, ministries we support, or service we've performed. Sometimes we attach righteousness to very earthly things like clothing, how we school our kids, language, books we've read, or food we eat. We even attach righteousness to the way in which we do things or even the way we've always have done things, often evaluating our current experience by our past experience. Traditionalism is more than using a tradition to enrich our COMMUNION with God; it is using a tradition as the basis for our UNION with Him.

To be clear, Christianity is this: *having been accepted by Jesus, we live like Jesus, depending on the Spirit of Jesus, out a love for Jesus and His glory.* **Traditionalism/legalism is the very opposite of Christianity.** *Legalism is: hoping to be accepted by Jesus, we live like Jesus, depending on ourselves, out a love for self and our own glory (e.g. to gain popularity, power, or prosperity).*

Traditions, whether they are rules or practices, are not inherently evil. **It is our disposition toward these good traditions that condemn us.** Making the traditions of men, even good ones, into the doctrines of God never produce godly men and women who are joyful and loving. On the contrary, such efforts usually produce people who are quite sad and unloving. **Like the Pharisees, traditionalist becomes self-critical, hyper-critical of others, and ultimately hypocritical before God and men.** The traditionalist spends most of his time avoiding life and not living it. The traditionalist spends most of this time working for God and not enjoying Him. The traditionalist spends most of this time legalist spends most of his time looking outward to condemn (feel superior) or compare (feel inferior) others and not to appreciate and serve them. **Mostly, it is a life of fear always wondering...am I clean enough to be loved?**

sins vs. SIN

We wrongly believe we can clean ourselves by "DOING" something external because we fail to understand that we have an internal problem. There is a difference between sins and SIN. There is a lot of confusion about our sin because no one ever talks about it. It's easy to about the SINS "out there" or the SINS "over there", but SIN is *not* something bad that comes from without, it is something bad that comes from within. In commenting about the recent events surrounding the Ferguson shooting, NFL player Benjamin Watson's comments when viral: *I'm encouraged because ultimately the problem is not a SKIN problem, it is a SIN problem. SIN is the reason we rebel against authority. SIN is the reason we abuse authority. Sin is the reason we are racist, prejudiced, and lie to cover our own. SIN is the reason we riot, loot, and burn. But I'M ENCOURAGED because God has provided a solution for sin through his son Jesus and with*

it, a transformed heart and mind. One that's capable of looking past the outward and seeing what is truly important in every human being...

Jesus reveals that the root of our problem is not what comes out of the world and makes us dirty, it is our heart and makes the world dirty. **Our hearts are not made dark by the world; darkness of our hearts is makes the world dark.** Ironically, Jesus says that what is in the heart comes out of the mouth. In the case of the Pharisees, which is the same for a legalistic Christian, the critical words that come out not only reveal their lack of faith, but it destroys the faith of others.

- **No one can fix their internal brokenness with good external things.** We cannot be made clean by our own efforts. Quite the contrary, our efforts to do some only make us dirtier.
- **No one can fix their internal brokenness by avoiding bad external things.** No “dirt” from the outside can make you dirty on your insides. But, the dirt on the insides can make anything dirty on the outside.

If we're honest, many of us don't really believe that. There are many of us here who wrongly believe that God loves you (and not them) because of our good work. There are many others here who wrongly believe that God doesn't love you (but he does them) because of your lack of good work. You need to embrace grace. You're a traditionalist in denial, an accidental Pharisee.

Conclusion | Hypocrisy vs. Honesty

The escape from the trap of traditionalism (legalism) is simple; **repent and believe**. We are all hypocrites pretending we're clean. Refusing to admit we're dirty, we do all that we can to justify our sin, minimize our sin, hide our sin, redefine our sin, or worse, remove our sin with our “little” legalisms. In doing so, we only reveal that I don't believe God loves me in my dirtiness, or anyone else. Don't pretend, confess, repent, and believe. For the Bible says that: **9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1.9).** **But how do I know if I have been made clean?** Ask yourself two questions. Whether you think you are a believer or not: 1) How would you describe your relationship with God? Would you consider it good or bad? Close or distant? Healthy or unhealthy? Or, perhaps better asked, **what do you feel when you think about what God feels about you?** How do you see his face? Smiling? Frowning? Confused? 2) Next, having considered your relationship with God, what reason would you give for its condition? Where does your mind naturally go? If you think about how good you have been, or bad you have been; if you think about yourself at all, then you need to hear the gospel again.

What is the gospel: **Jesus became dirty and defiled so that we could be clean.** Jesus tried to help the Pharisees understand that God does not look at their hands to see if they are clean or unclean. God looks at our hearts—something we cannot clean ourselves. The Bible tells us that we all have done things that have made us unclean and dirty before a holy God. **These things separate us from Him.** But you don't have to remain enslaved to that dirt, it doesn't have to define you any more. God loves us and made a way for us to be clean and pure. **Jesus is not a better Pharisee with a better set of traditions. Jesus doesn't give us a better life; he gives us an entirely new one.** God sent His Son, Jesus, to help us. Jesus did live a life that was clean and pure. He never sinned at all. When He died on the cross, He died for all the wrong sins that we have done. He died for us! Then, three days later, Jesus came back to life!!

Believe and be cleansed.