

SESSION 2

Real Devotion

MATTHEW 15:1-11,16-20

JESUS REJECTS SUPERFICIAL RELIGION.



We tend to like things that are genuine. We generally say no to knockoffs, artificial, or substitute anything. Our taste buds can discern the real thing compared to artificial sweeteners. We like the genuine. The same is true in relationships. We want friends who are genuine, not superficial. Likewise, God desires our relationship with Him and the practice of our faith to be genuine.

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT YOU DEMAND TO BE GENUINE IN YOUR LIFE?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

In Matthew 12, the Pharisees had challenged the disciples and Jesus over failure to keep their traditions regarding the Sabbath. In chapter 15, these religious leaders challenged the disciples and Jesus concerning their failure to keep dietary laws regarding the ceremonial cleansing of the hands.

Jesus condemned the Pharisees and scribes for their unbelief and their adherence to man-made tradition. To the crowd who had observed the interchange about dietary laws between Jesus and the Pharisees, He pointed out that what a person eats doesn't make a person unclean. Rather, uncleanness comes from within a person's heart.

The disciples were puzzled by Jesus's response to the Pharisees. They also didn't understand His answer to the crowd about what defiles a person.

After answering the disciples, Jesus, with the disciples, left Galilee and traveled into the region of Tyre and Sidon (modern-day Lebanon). He also was not ready for the final confrontation with the Jewish authorities.

Teaching still needed to be done to prepare the disciples.

It was here that a shift took place. While in Tyre, Jesus was petitioned by a Canaanite woman who wanted healing for her daughter. Jesus initially ignored the woman's plea, stating He was sent to the Jewish people. But after much persistence, Jesus granted the healing to the daughter of this Gentile woman. The implication is that Jesus extended the kingdom of God into the Gentile world.

This shift is reinforced by the narration of healing people and feeding four thousand men plus women and children in the Gentile region of the Decapolis. These two incidents portend the expansion of the kingdom of God to the Gentiles that is explored in great detail in Acts 10–28.



1 Then Jesus was approached by Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, who asked, **2** “Why do your disciples break the **tradition of the elders?** **A** For they don’t **wash their hands** **B** when they eat.” **3** He answered them, “Why do you break **God’s commandment** **C** because of your tradition? **4** For God said: Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever **speaks evil** **D** of father or mother must be put to death. **5** But you say, ‘Whoever tells his father or mother, “Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a **gift** **E** committed to the temple,” **6** he does not have to honor his father.’ In this way, you have **nullified** **F** the word of God because of your tradition. **7 Hypocrites!** **G** Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said: **8** This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. **9** They worship me **in vain,** **H** teaching as doctrines human commands.” **10** Summoning the crowd, he told them, “Listen and understand: **11** It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth—this defiles a person. [. . .] **16** Do you still lack understanding?” he asked. **17** “Don’t you realize that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is eliminated? **18** But what comes out of the mouth comes **from the heart,** **I** and this defiles a person. **19** For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander. **20** These are the things that defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person.”

A. “Age-old tradition” (NLT). Jewish oral tradition was codified in the Mishnah with instructions for various ceremonies.

B. This washing was a matter of ceremonial tradition, not personal hygiene. Jesus probably discounted this ritual along with His followers.

C. Jesus contrasted the Pharisees’ oral traditions with God’s actual laws. As He would point out, some oral traditions actually nullified God’s law.

D. “Curses” (NIV). More than disrespect, it implies wishing harm on someone or denouncing one’s relationship with someone.

E. The practice of “Corban.” Pledging resources to the temple to avoid using it to help others.

F. The oral traditions of the religious elite set aside the authority of God’s own commands.

G. Originally a neutral reference to an actor on a stage, it came to refer to duplicity or insincerity.

H. Implies emptiness, futility, folly. Teaching human ideas as God’s Word is hollow and useless.

I. The true source of human actions. Jesus emphasized the condition of our hearts apart from God’s grace. This corruption is highlighted by the list of sins in verse 19.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

1. Broken Rules

(Matt. 15:1-6)

Honor God's laws above all other rules.

- **Why is it easy to confuse human rules with God's commands?**

2. Lip Service

(Matt. 15:7-11)

Pray for your heart to remain close to God.

- **What tempts our hearts to drift from God?**

3. Real Problem

(Matt. 15:16-20)

Reject superficial religion and focus on what matters most.

- **How do you imagine Jesus's tone? Angry? Frustrated? Compassionate? Why?**
- **How can we evaluate our hearts to prevent sinful attitudes from taking root? Why is it important to examine our hearts for sinful attitudes?**

Apply the Text

As a group, identify areas where it becomes easy in life to accept the superficial. Pinpoint the areas that are especially difficult for your group members. Discuss ways you can encourage one another to develop a deeper relationship with God that will avoid the inauthentic in your walk with God.

KEY DOCTRINE:

Salvation

Regeneration is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. (See Luke 13:3; John 3:3.)

BIBLE SKILL:

Take seriously all biblical commands for Christian living.

Read Matthew 15:1-6. Identify in these verses the commands based on God's Word. Identify any practices based on human tradition. Why do you think some people make man-made traditions the measure of spirituality (v. 2)? Make a list of ways you can avoid the trap of substituting human expectations for obedience to God's Word.

DAILY EXPLORATION



Day 1: Matthew 15:1-2

Consider the nature of the religious leaders' complaint.

The Pharisees were the leading religious party in Israel and were strict adherents to the law of Moses. Even more radical was their personal interpretation and application of the law. Their interpretation, or oral law as it was called, took precedent over the law given by God to Moses. Many of these Pharisees were also scribes who were learned scholars and copyists of the law. As such, they joined the Pharisees in a constant scrutiny of Jesus's every word and move.

What is prominent in this particular confrontation is that these Pharisees and scribes were "from Jerusalem." Perhaps they were sent by the Jewish Sanhedrin to check out the rumors circulating about Jesus's activity in Galilee. Because they were from Jerusalem, they would pose a greater and more serious threat to Jesus; they had greater authority than the religious leaders from Galilee.

Their complaint focused on why the disciples (and Jesus) violated the "tradition of the elders" by not performing the ceremonial washing of hands before eating. This practice was part of their man-made rules and regulations. The issue wasn't whether they washed their hands but how they did it and the exact amount of water used. The rules regarding hand washing were very precise and cumbersome.

What is a modern-day expression of "the tradition of the elders"?



Day 2: Matthew 15:3-6

Notice how Jesus set the groundwork for His response to the Pharisees.

Jesus ignored the specific criticism concerning hand washing and moved to the heart of the matter. The issue was man-made traditions versus the God-given law. He set the groundwork for His position against the superficial religion of the Pharisees by pointing to Scripture—specifically, the commandment to honor one's mother and father (Ex. 20:12). Jesus added another line from Exodus 21:17 to highlight the penalty for failure to honor one's parents. Having reminded the Pharisees of what the law said, Jesus pointed out the contradictory nature of their man-made traditions.

Corban was the dedication of money and other resources to the temple treasury to be paid upon one's death. This pledge money could not be given to anyone else. It was dedicated in advance, and the pledge could not be revoked. But the money that was pledged in corban could still be used for the benefit of the person pledging it as long as they were alive. In Jesus's example, a person could live high off his wealth, but when his indigent parents had a need, he could declare that his wealth was pledged to the temple, and he couldn't share any of it.

This selfish practice violated the command to honor one's parents. Thus, this superficial religious tradition violated both the letter and spirit of God's law given at Mount Sinai.

Why is it important to evaluate tradition in light of Scripture?



Day 3: Matthew 15:7-9

Reflect on why people are drawn to legalistic religion.

After detailing the way in which the Pharisees circumvented the law of Moses with their man-made traditions, Jesus scathingly denounced them. He called them “hypocrites,” a word that means to play act, to be a pretender, to put on a mask and act out a part. Jesus called them two-faced. To add weight to His denunciation, Jesus quoted from Isaiah (Isa. 29:13). In that passage, Isaiah denounced the people of his day for their inauthentic worship. They gave the appearance of a genuine relationship with God through their worship. In reality, they were simply going through the motions while ignoring God’s desires.

This tendency to substitute a human-based rule system for following God’s directives has always plagued mankind. Paul said the attempt to keep the law would not put a person in a right relationship with God. “For no one will be justified in his sight by the works of the law, because the knowledge of sin comes through the law” (Rom. 3:20). God’s law was designed to show us how sinful we are and how much we need a Savior. Because following God’s law perfectly is unobtainable, it was easier to create man-made rules that could be followed successfully. Keeping these traditions would provide a sense of self-satisfaction and pride. But following man-made traditions actually moved them farther from God.

What is the attraction of a religious system based on man-made rules?



Day 4: Matthew 15:10-11

Circle the words “listen and understand.”

Apparently, the Pharisees left in disgust. Turning to the crowd, Jesus explained His condemnation of the Pharisees. The words “listen and understand” were often used to introduce something very important that was being said. *Pay attention* is what Jesus meant. With that introduction, He challenged the whole system of the oral tradition regarding dietary laws. The extensive system of ceremonial hand washing was worthless and meaningless.

The law of Moses differentiated between “clean” and “unclean.” Much of this related to good hygiene practice but also to rid Israel of the pagan influence of the Egyptian religion. Over the centuries, the oral traditions related to clean and unclean had become complex. These man-made layers to the written law were the things to which Jesus strongly objected. Jesus declared that a person wasn’t corrupted or defiled by the food put into their mouth—but by the words and thoughts that came out of their mouth. Defilement comes from what’s inside a person. As Jesus will clarify in verses 18-19, what’s in the heart comes out of the mouth. As a result, genuine purity before God isn’t about food going in; it’s defined by what we allow to rule our hearts each day.

Why is it important to examine your heart for sinful attitudes?



Day 5: Matthew 15:16-20

Compare Matthew 15:16-20 to Jeremiah 17:9-10.

Peter, as spokesman for the disciples, asked for an explanation of the parable that Jesus had given. It was not so much that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus had said. More likely, they found such a hard teaching difficult to accept.

Jesus set up a contrast between the physical and the spiritual. He told the disciples that food is only physical and does not impact the spiritual. Instead, what is eaten goes through the digestive system and "is eliminated." No matter how "clean" or "unclean" food might be, eating it does not impact a person spiritually.

The words of one's mouth reflect the condition of a person's heart. It is a person's evil attitudes, motives, and thoughts that corrupt the spiritual condition of a person.

Continuing His explanation, Jesus elaborated on the things that defile the heart—"evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander." Many of these defiling elements are contained in the sixth through ninth commandments of the Ten Commandments. Each of these outward actions arise first as a thought or an attitude of the heart. It is the heart that needs to be transformed. The way to be "clean" is to allow God to cleanse your heart.

Pray Psalms 51:10 and 139:23-24.

APPLY THE TEXT

Take time to prayerfully evaluate your life. What are some things you are substituting for a genuine relationship with God? In prayer, confess these to God. What steps can you take to ensure that your relationship with God is not becoming superficial?

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