

Real Devotion

JESUS REJECTS SUPERFICIAL RELIGION.

A church was known for its annual charity fundraiser. They hosted a big event with a dinner, music, and auctions to raise money for local shelters. Many of the church's members saw this high-profile occasion as a chance to dress up, socialize, and show off their generosity.

One year, Peter, a young church leader, noticed that while the fundraiser always raised a lot of money, the focus had shifted to appearances more than on the cause for the event. Some members spent weeks planning their outfits, and others seemed to show more concern with who would see their donations than how much would actually go to help those in need.

During a meeting to plan the event, Peter brought up his concerns, that the event should be focused more on the people the church was trying to help rather than the event itself. One of the church members responded that since people loved the event and it always raised lots of money, why fix what wasn't broken?

The church's pastor, who had been listening quietly, spoke up. "I'm reminded of what Jesus told the Pharisees in Matthew 15. They focused on outward rituals, but their hearts were far from God. We can't let our good deeds become a way to look good to others. Our charity needs to come from a genuine place of love and compassion, not just a desire to keep up appearances." The church fundraiser had become more about appearances and less about helping others. Both church leaders encouraged a shift in focus from superficial actions to genuine compassion, mirroring Jesus's call to prioritize the heart over empty rituals.

The room was silent for a moment. A church member looked thoughtful. "I hadn't seen it that way before. Maybe we could include a segment during the event to hear directly from the people we're helping, so everyone is reminded why we're doing this."

In Matthew 15, Jesus confronted the Pharisees about their focus on external rituals while neglecting the deeper, internal aspects of faith. He pointed out that their worship was superficial because they honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him.

Matthew 15:1-39

Matthew 15 underscores the themes of genuine faith, compassion, and the priority of God's commands over human traditions. Controversy over the traditional religious practices and Jesus's treatment of uncleanness and the importance of inner purity climaxes in this chapter. Jesus was approached by the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. They questioned Him as to why His disciples broke the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before eating (vv. 1-2). Jesus accused them of using their traditions to avoid fulfilling God's commands (vv. 3-9).

As Jesus addressed the crowd, He shifted the focus from external rituals like dietary laws and handwashing to the moral and ethical dimensions of a person's thoughts, words, and deeds. He taught them and His disciples that true defilement does not come from external actions but rather from the heart (vv. 10-20). This teaching challenges believers to focus on developing a genuine, heartfelt relationship with Jesus, marked by love, compassion, and truthfulness, rather than relying solely on outward religious observances and traditions.

Later, in the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman persistently begged for Jesus's help to heal her daughter who was severely tormented by a demon. Although not a Jew, she displayed a genuine faith in Jesus. After initially resisting her, Jesus rewarded her humility and unwavering faith by healing her daughter (vv. 21-28).

Jesus continued to demonstrate compassion by healing many people on a mountainside. The astonished crowd gave glory to the God of Israel for the miracles. Subsequently, Jesus miraculously fed the crowd of four thousand with just seven loaves and a few fish (v. 29-39).

Broken Rules (Matt. 15:1-6)

A group of Pharisees and scribes came up from Jerusalem, likely sent as an official contingency to check up on the ministry of Jesus and how they could stop Him. They asked why Jesus's disciples broke the traditional rules of hand washing before they ate. Instead of directly answering

their question, Jesus challenged their priorities. He asked them why they violated God’s commandments for the sake of their traditions.

VERSES 1-2

Then Jesus was approached by Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, who asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they don’t wash their hands when they eat.”

A special delegation of **Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem** traveled to Galilee to see Jesus. This journey—which would have taken about week—signaled a confrontational visit as they continued building their case against Jesus (12:14). This marked the only time that Matthew reversed the order in referencing the scribes and Pharisees (5:20; 12:38; 23:2,13,15,23,25,27,29). He may have changed the order to indicate that the Pharisees instigated this clash and had brought along the scribes, the legal experts in Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish traditions, for support.

The Pharisees advocated for strict obedience to the Jewish law and traditions, and questioned Jesus, **“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?”** *The tradition of the elders* refers to hundreds of laws and practices the Pharisees and their scribes had added over the centuries since the Jews had returned from Babylonian captivity. The religious officials considered them to be as equally authoritative as the original law of Moses. In essence, they used those traditions to build a hedge to protect the law of Moses from being broken and regarded these traditions as being of equal authority with the Scriptures.

In questioning Jesus as to why His disciples didn’t **wash their hands when they eat**, they were seeking to disqualify Jesus as a true rabbi. This was not a question of personal hygiene, but rather by not washing their hands before eating, the disciples had not removed their ceremonial defilement and thus anything they touched would have become unclean. Furthermore, eating unclean food was viewed as making the whole person unclean.

VERSE 3

He answered them, “Why do you break God’s commandment because of your tradition?”

Since the Pharisees had spoken from deep hypocrisy, Jesus brushed off their accusation. He refused to fall for their rhetorical trap of having to explain why His disciples had broken their tradition. Jesus flipped the

question on them, **“Why do you break God’s commandment because of your tradition?”** In doing so, He charged them with breaking an explicit commandment of God for the sake of the tradition of the elders. By pitting *God’s commandment* against their *tradition*, Jesus made clear which was the ultimate authority. The Pharisees had become so focused on protecting their tradition that they demanded observance on ceremonial washings which had no scriptural basis.

VERSES 4-6

“For God said: Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death. But you say, ‘Whoever tells his father or mother, “Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a gift committed to the temple,” he does not have to honor his father.’ In this way, you have nullified the word of God because of your tradition.”

Jesus made the contrast even clearer by continuing, **“For God said: Honor your father and your mother”** (see Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). By pitting what *God said* against their tradition, Jesus challenged the Pharisees at the foundation of their argument. They probably thought they had fully observed this command. The Hebrew verb translated *honor* in Exodus 20:12 sometimes referred to giving monetary gifts or support. Jesus inferred that honoring one’s parents demanded providing the resources they needed when they could no longer support themselves due to sickness or old age. Refusing to care for one’s parents devalued them.

Jesus called out the Pharisees for devising a way to skirt around God’s commandment to honor one’s parents. The words **but you say** established a contrast between what the Pharisees taught and what God said. The phrase demonstrated that they usurped God’s command with a procedural regulation designed to obscure the true intent of the commandment. Matthew’s readers would have recognized the specific language of the vow, **“Whatever benefit you might have received from me,”** and understood it as committing financial support to **the temple** rather than helping their parents. Mark identified this practice as “corban” (Mark 7:11), a gift particularly designated for the Lord and thus forbidden for any other use.

Jesus went on to connect the command to honor one’s parents to a further prescription that **“whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death”** (see Ex. 21:17). The Hebrew word translated “curses” in Exodus 21:17 meant to declare someone insignificant or to

treat with contempt. If children refused to provide for their parents in their old age, then they would not have honored them. The prescription of the death penalty while seeming harsh demonstrates how seriously God takes honoring and caring for one's parents.

This loophole apparently allowed the individual to hold onto valuable items and make use of them. While the exact means of skirting this command is not certain, the intent is clear. In this way, the child avoided the responsibility to care for his parents.

Jesus emphatically stated that this practice did not **honor** one's parents as the commandment intended and did not even come close to showing them proper respect. He said that it nullified God's revealed law through Moses and elevated the tradition of the elders as superior to God's original intent for the His law.



Explore Further

Read the article "Jewish Parties in the New Testament" and the accompanying chart on pages 896–899 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What were the beliefs specific to the Pharisees? Why did they oppose Jesus?

Lip Service (Matt. 15:7-11)

Jesus called out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes for honoring God with their lip service while their hearts were far from Him. Their worship was in vain. They elevated their tradition to the same or even higher level than God's commands. Then Jesus turned to the crowd to make the connection that the religious leaders had missed. What made a person unclean did not come from what went into the mouth but what came out, because it actually reflected the condition of one's heart.

VERSE 7

“Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said:”

Jesus stung the religious delegation from Jerusalem with a single blistering word: **“Hypocrites!”** Although originally a term related to the

theater, Jesus's usage expressed fake piety in relation to religious expression. This meant that not only had the religious leaders deceived others with their words and actions, but they had actually disastrously deceived themselves as well into thinking that their religious practices had given them right standing with God. Jesus connected their hypocrisy to what **Isaiah prophesied** concerning their scribal approach to law-keeping. The indictment Isaiah pronounced against his own contemporaries applied to the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus's day as well.

VERSES 8-9

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines human commands.”

Jesus applied the words of Isaiah to the scribes and Pharisees, accusing them of honoring God with **their lips** without honoring Him with **their heart**. Using the singular *heart* while referring to the plural **people** indicates these religious leaders shared the same attitude of hypocrisy and unbelief. All they could offer to God was lip service because **their heart is far from** God. The Pharisees and scribes worshiped Him **in vain**, meaning in a manner not acceptable to God, because they taught their **human commands** had the same authority as God's Word.

VERSES 10-11

Summoning the crowd, he told them, “Listen and understand: It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth — this defiles a person.”

Jesus finally addressed the Pharisees and scribes' original question (v. 2) and corrected their perverted view of the Word of God. Jesus intended that everyone in the crowd **listen and understand** what the Pharisees had missed concerning the nature of uncleanness. He wanted the people to hear what He had to say and to give it careful consideration so that they could grasp it. Jesus insisted that **what goes into the mouth** will not defile a person, even if the food had been touched by hands that had not been ritually purified. This would have offended pious Jews of the time because they practiced careful ritual washing as a part of everyday life. Jesus's teaching was radically different. His use of the Greek strong adversative translated as **but** suggests a call for a major modification to Jewish practices. He made it clear that **what comes out of the mouth** really **defiles a person**. In this context, Jesus implied

that the hypocritical teaching of the Pharisees and scribes had made them unclean.



Explore Further

Read the article “Hypocrisy” on pages 783–784 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are the various ways the term “hypocrisy” is used in the Bible? According to Jesus’s teachings, what does it mean to be a hypocrite? How can we guard from being hypocrites in our relationships with God and others?

Real Problem (Matt. 15:16-20)

The religious leaders were concerned primarily with outward behavior, such as eating the right kinds of foods. Jesus emphasized that any food that is consumed passes through our bodies over time. In contrast, the attitudes individuals nurture in their hearts will come out in their actions and reveal the state of their hearts.

VERSE 16

“Do you still lack understanding?” he asked.

The Pharisees were highly regarded in Jewish culture for their seeming religious dedication to God and His law. Jesus’s disciples feared that He did not realize that He had offended them (v. 12). Jesus replied by saying God had not “planted” the Pharisees and that He would “uproot” them (v. 13). In other words, their authority did not come from God. Concerning offending them, Jesus told His disciples to just leave them alone. They were blind guides, meaning they lacked the understanding necessary to know the truth about God or to lead others to God (vv. 13-14). Peter often spoke for the disciples, and he asked Jesus to explain the parable to them (v. 15).

Jesus rebuked His disciples by asking, **“Do you still lack understanding?”** Clearly Jesus expected His disciples to have gained more understanding than what Peter’s request implied.

VERSE 17

“Don’t you realize that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is eliminated?”

Jesus began His explanation with a follow-up question that He expected His disciples to answer positively. He obviously assumed that they knew how digestion worked in their bodies but explained that **whatever**, literally meaning “everything,” went into the **mouth** traveled **into the stomach**. The body uses what it needs and the remaining waste **is eliminated**. Jesus flatly stated that nothing entering a person’s mouth defiles the individual. *Whatever* went into the mouth, the body expelled it into the “latrine” (literal translation), meaning that nothing remained that would have rendered the individual unclean. Jesus wanted His disciples to know that if people did not ceremonially wash their hands, it had no effect on their moral condition (v. 11).

VERSE 18

“But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this defiles a person.”

Jesus said that **what comes out of the mouth** reveals the content of a person’s heart. By the **heart**, Jesus referred to one’s innermost being—“the seat of [one’s] thought and will”—from which all words and actions flow.¹ The Bible frequently affirms that all people fall short of God’s standard (Isa. 64:6; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 3:10-12,23; 5:12).

Matthew used two different Greek words translated as *comes*. *Comes out of the mouth* means to go out, while *comes from the heart* means to come out. By using two different verbs with similar meanings, Matthew showed that the words that go out of the mouth originated from the heart. In a previous encounter with the Pharisees, Jesus made a similar correlation (Matt. 12:34-35).

Jesus raised the stakes by transferring the source of the defilement from the outward to the inward state of the heart. “At one stroke he removes the necessity for a multiplicity of regulations to cover a variety of situations and concentrates on an attitude that will take care of them all”²—the condition of the heart.

VERSE 19

“For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander.”

Jesus provided a list of specific examples of the defilement which demonstrates a person's internal moral corruption. He began with the broad category of **evil thoughts**, which can lead to all kinds of sinful actions, including anger (5:21-26), greed (6:19-21), worry (vv. 25-34), lust (5:27-30), hate (vv. 43-47), and hypocritical judgment (7:1-5).

Murder is the unlawful taking of another's life, while **theft** is the unlawful taking of another's property. **Adulteries** and **sexual immoralities** covered the entire range of sexual sins committed by both married and single people. **False testimonies** involve lying in order to mislead or deceive, while **slander** destroys another's testimony and/or reputation through half-truths and lies.

VERSE 20

“These are the things that defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person.”

Jesus brought the discussion back full circle to the Pharisees' original charge that His disciples needed to observe ritual hand washing (v. 2). As He concluded, Jesus strongly stated that the sins coming out of the heart **defile a person**. No unclean thing, knowingly or unknowingly eaten because a person ate with **unwashed hands**, could ever *defile* a person.

Jesus's teaching aligns with other biblical references regarding the depravity of the heart (Ps. 14:3; 51:5; 58:3; Rom. 3:9-18,23; Eph. 2:3; 1 John 1:8-10). But Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers assure us that the human heart can be transformed through the atoning work of Christ and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit within the believer (Rom. 13:13-14; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 5:16-26).

Explore Further

Read the article “Heart” on pages 719–720 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are the different aspects to the biblical understanding of the human heart? Why is it important that we examine our hearts for sinful attitudes?

1. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 586.

2. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 398.