

Real Devotion

JESUS REJECTS SUPERFICIAL RELIGION.

Matthew 15:1-11,16-20

1 Then Jesus was approached by **Pharisees** **A** and **scribes** **B** from Jerusalem, who asked, 2 “Why do your disciples break the **tradition of the elders?** **C** For they don’t **wash their hands** **D** when they eat.” 3 He answered them, “Why do you break **God’s commandment** **E** because of your tradition? 4 For God said: Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever **speaks evil** **F** 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** **G** committed to the temple,” 6 he does not have to honor his father.’ In this way, you have **nullified** **H** the word of God because of your tradition. 7 **Hypocrites!** **I** 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**, **J** 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** **K** 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**, **L** 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.”

Exploring Key Words

- A** A large and highly influential religious group in ancient Israel. Pharisees regularly challenged Jesus and played a central role in His crucifixion (Matt. 26:62).
- B** Teachers of the law in Israel. Scribes copied, interpreted, and taught the Scriptures.
- C** “Age-old tradition” (NLT). Jewish oral tradition was codified in the Mishnah with instructions for various ceremonies.
- D** This washing was a matter of ceremonial tradition, not personal hygiene. Jesus probably discounted this ritual along with His followers.
- E** Jesus contrasted the Pharisees’ oral traditions with God’s actual laws. As He would point out, some oral traditions actually nullified God’s law.
- F** “Curses” (NIV); “reviles” (ESV). More than disrespect, it implies wishing harm on someone or denouncing one’s relationship with someone.
- G** The practice of “Corban.” Pledging resources to the temple to avoid using it to help others. Jesus specified the support of aging parents.
- H** “None effect” (KJV); “made void” (ESV). The oral traditions of the religious elite set aside the authority of God’s own commands.
- I** Originally a neutral reference to an actor on a stage, it came to refer to duplicity or insincerity.
- J** Implies emptiness, futility, folly. Teaching human ideas as God’s Word is hollow and useless.
- K** Jesus contrasted physical dirt on one’s hands with moral and spiritual defilement of the heart.
- L** 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.



Broken Rules (Matt. 15:1-6)

- A group of religious leaders accused Jesus and His disciples of ignoring the traditions of the elders by not practicing a ceremonial hand washing.
- Jesus pointed out that the religious leaders actually were breaking God's law through Moses by encouraging individuals to set aside resources for the temple instead of using them to support their aging parents. These leaders were choosing to place human traditions over the commands of God.

Lip Service (Matt. 15:7-11)

- Labeling the religious leaders "hypocrites," Jesus described them further by quoting the prophet Isaiah. He noted that they were quick to give God lip service, but their hearts were far from Him.
- Because they cared more about laws of men than of God, they could never understand that true defilement is rooted in a person's heart.

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 could lead to sin.

Summary Statements

Jesus rejects superficial religion.

- Honor God's laws above all other rules.
- Pray for your heart to remain close to God.
- Reject superficial religion and focus on what matters most.

Memory Verse

Matthew 15:8-9

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.)



For additional commentary, see the Leader Guide or Adult Commentary, available for purchase at goExploreTheBible.com.

ENGAGE

What are some things that you demand to be genuine in your life? (PSG, p. 18)

- We tend to like things that are genuine. We generally say no to knockoffs, artificial, or substitute anything.
- Don't give us blended vegetables and call them hamburgers. We've developed an eye for spotting imitation leather and knockoff purses. We like the genuine.
- Likewise, God desires our relationship with Him and the practice of our faith to be genuine.

Bonus: What is the danger of embracing a superficial faith instead of a genuine faith?

EXPLORE

BROKEN RULES (MATT. 15:1-6)

Bonus: What are some obscure rules in sports? Why are they still part of these games?

- In reading the Gospels, we discover that almost every time Jesus healed or taught, representatives from the Pharisees and scribes were present. This was especially true in the latter part of Jesus's ministry in Galilee.
- The Pharisees were the leading religious party in Israel and were strict adherents to the law of Moses. Many of these Pharisees were also scribes who were learned scholars and copyists of the law.
- Their complaint focused on why the disciples (and Jesus) violated the "tradition of the elders" or their man-made interpretations and applications of the law.
- The issue wasn't whether they washed their hands but specifically how they did it and the exact amount of water used. The rules were very precise and cumbersome.
- Jesus ignored the specific criticism concerning hand washing and moved to the heart of the matter. This was an issue of man-made traditions versus the God-given law. Jesus zeroed in on the Jewish practice of "Corban," which involved dedicating resources to the temple treasury so they could not be given to anyone else. Often, this tradition was used to neglect aging parents.

Why is it easy to confuse human rules with God's commands? (PSG, p. 22)

LIP SERVICE (MATT. 15:7-11)

Bonus: When have you acted in a play or musical? How did it feel to "become" that character for a while?

- After detailing how the Pharisees rejected God's law with their man-made traditions, Jesus scathingly denounced them. He called them "hypocrites," a word that means to put on a mask and act out a part. Angrily, Jesus called them two-faced.

- Quoting Isaiah, He said they gave the appearance of a genuine relationship with God, while ignoring God's desires. Their relationship with God was shallow at best and non-existent at worst.
- Turning to His listeners, Jesus explained His condemnation of the Pharisees. He declared that individuals aren't corrupted by the food put into their mouths, but by the words and thoughts that came out of their mouths. Defilement comes from what's inside a person.

What tempts our hearts to drift from God? (PSG, p. 23)

REAL PROBLEM (MATT. 15:16-20)

Why is it important to examine our hearts for sinful attitudes? (PSG, p. 25)

- Peter asked for an explanation of the parable that Jesus had given. Jesus reminded them that food is only physical and does not impact the spiritual.
- The spiritual dimension of life is reflected in the attitudes, motives, and desires of the heart. The words of one's mouth reflect the condition of a one's heart. It is a person's evil attitudes, motives, and thoughts that corrupt the spiritual condition of a person.
- The unregenerate heart is filled with pride, selfishness, and sin of every sort. That is what defiles a person. The way to be "clean" is to allow God to cleanse your heart.

Bonus: Who can hold you accountable for examining your heart regularly? What might hold you back from asking that person for help?

CHALLENGE

As a group, identify areas where it becomes easy in life to accept the superficial.

Discuss ways you can encourage one another to develop a deeper relationship with God that will avoid the inauthentic in your walk with God. (PSG, p. 26)

Challenge adults to evaluate their lives prayerfully.

What are some things you are substituting for a genuine relationship with God? In prayer, confess these to God. (PSG, p. 26)

FURTHER DISCUSSION



Scan here for additional discussion questions for this week's study.

BIBLE SKILL (PSG, P. 25)

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.

Draw two columns on the board: *Physical Life* and *Spiritual Life*. Encourage adults to suggest areas where they will not accept substitutes or imitations. Record their responses on the board. Direct them to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 25 of the PSG. After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share their responses and record them in the second column. Challenge the group to take practical steps to avoid superficial religion and to embrace what is genuine and real.

OBJECT LESSON: RULEBOOK

Prior to the session, obtain a rulebook for a popular sport. During the session, show adults the rulebook. Point out that it provides the basics for competition in that sport. Ask: **What would it be like to play a game without the rules?** Affirm that it would get frustrating after a while—and no one would be able to win.

Note that rulebooks take other forms in our lives each day, such as employee handbooks at work or instructions for assembling a toy. Allow volunteers to suggest additional "rulebooks" they encounter in their lives. Affirm again that, just as in games, these rulebooks play an important role. Say: **They provide clear focus and keep chaos to a minimum.**

Show adults a copy of the Bible. Emphasize that God's Word is the ultimate rulebook for our lives—and no man-made list of rules can compare.

THE PHARISEE INSIDE US

Throughout Jesus's ministry, He clashed with the Pharisees and other religious leaders of the day. As Matthew 15 shows us, these conflicts often centered upon the Pharisees' elevation of external things (such as washing hands or eating with tax collectors) more than the internal matters of the heart.

Interestingly, in Luke 18:9-14, the Pharisees were not only in the crowd listening as Jesus spoke, but they also were the subject of one of His parables. Jesus contrasted the prayers of a self-righteous Pharisee and a humble tax collector (Luke 18:10). The Pharisee looked down upon others and thought highly of his own obedience. He could easily identify the sin of others, but he overlooked his own (18:11-12). This was the very spirit behind the religious elite's ongoing confrontations with Jesus, including those in Matthew 15.

The tax collector sat on the opposite side of the spiritual spectrum. He saw his own need and cried out to God for forgiveness (18:13). He realized that he was

his own worst enemy. His greatest problem could be found inside his own sinful heart. The only solution to his spiritual crisis was to cry out to God with humility and to depend on His mercy.

Jesus concluded His parable by teaching that it was the tax collector who went home justified that day. He was the one who was made right with God. If we come to God in pride, trusting in our own obedience and righteousness, we will be humbled. But if we come to God in humility, depending on His mercy and grace for forgiveness, we will be exalted.

The truth is we all lean toward the Pharisees. We trust ourselves, we focus on the sins of others, and we clean up on the outside without addressing our real need on the inside. Like Jesus's parable in Luke 18, we are invited to examine ourselves and to seek God's mercy and forgiveness. While we all may have a little Pharisee in us, we can be justified like the tax collector.