

The Problem with Religion (Matthew 15:1-20)

Verses 1-2

- Antagonists from Jerusalem (the heavyweights had arrived)

The Tradition of the Elders

- The **tradition of the elders** was also known as the **oral law** passed down from generation to generation
 - By AD 200, these traditions were compiled into a book called the Mishna (+ Gemara = Talmud)
 - Two authorities developed:** (1) **The law of God**, and (2) **the traditions of the elders**
- = Students and teachers of God's word who were exploring all the ways God's law should be **applied** to specific situations in people's lives
 - Idea of the **oral law** was to "**build a fence around the law**"
 - I.e. If you do not violate the traditions, you will not violate the law
 - Jesus was only opposed to **tradition and the oral law** when it contradicted or got in the way of the Word of God. Otherwise He was fine with them and actually practiced some of them (praying before meals; temple-tax; etc)
- E.g. **About the washing of hands**
 - What was being referenced here was not a hygiene issue, but one of **ceremonial cleansing** based on tradition (idea of **defilement**)
 - Exodus 30:17-21** talks about the priest washing their hands and feet at the temple sacrifices
 - The **tradition** (oral law) extended this to all Jews at all times & food (**like a fence around the law**)
 - Hence the complaint/charge/accusation (**verse 2**)

The problem here is that these religious leaders were (1) missing a key truth about **defilement**, and (2) using their **traditions** to live selfishly, and (3) misplacing divine and final authority

Verses 3-9

- Jesus directs their attention immediately to **the Word of God** (as opposed to the traditions of people)
 - The **authority** is found in God's Word! (**see verse 9b**)
 - Jesus calls them out two times (**vv. 3 & 6**) on their **preference of tradition over Scripture**
 - They had adopted an authority other than God's word
 - 2 Timothy 3:16-17**, NIV and **2 Peter 1:20-21**, NLT and **1 Peter 1:23-25**, NIV
- Jesus exposes their hypocrisy—they were actually living from a place of **selfishness**, not holiness (**vv. 4-5**)
 - Jesus quoted: **Deuteronomy 5:16**, NIV and **Leviticus 20:7-9**, NIV; see also **1 Timothy 5:4 & 8**, NIV
 - Notice that His example is one around **caring for people and honoring them** (the Pharisees were concerned with **personal holiness**) (Jesus turns them toward **relational holiness**)

"**Devoted to God**" (v. 5) = **Korban** (Mark 7:11)

- Transliteration of the Hebrew word for "offering" and always used in the OT to refer to offerings made to God
- "**The Korban practice in view was that of pledging money or other material resources to the temple to be paid upon one's death. These funds could therefore not be transferred to anyone else but could still be used for one's own benefit while one was still alive.**" (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 238)
- They had come up with traditions that allowed them not to care for their parents (i.e. obey God's word)

Verses 7-9

- Hypocrites...**
 - "**We see where other folks are failing, and we turn our discernment into the gibe of criticism instead of into intercession on their behalf... Take care lest you play the hypocrite by spending all your time trying to get others right before you worship God yourself.**" (Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*)
- Lip service** vs. life service (they did not walk the talk) (their **hearts** were not in it)
- "**They worship me in vain**"
 - Vain** = fruitless, without results (did not bless God, did not transform them)

- "Let it be a settled resolution with us that in all our religion the state of our hearts shall be the main thing. Let it not content us to go to church and observe the forms of religion. Let us look far deeper than this and desire to have a heart right in the sight of the Lord." (Ryle, *Matthew*, 129)
- "Their teachings are merely human rules"
 - As long as the **thoughts of man** are central then the worship of man will be central
 - When the truth of GOD is central then the worship of God is central
 - "A word-saturated church leads to God-glorifying worship"¹
 - Worship must be formed by truth and from the heart (*John 4:23-24*, NASB)
 - David to His son Solomon: *1 Chronicles 28:9*, NASB

After rebuking the religious leaders Jesus turns to the crowd to teach them

- Remember, the religious leaders were (1) missing a key truth about **defilement**

Verses 10-20

- Jesus shows us the true path and source of defilement (the human heart)
 - **As a face is reflected in water, so the heart reflects the real person.** (*Proverbs 27:19*, NLT)
- Turns the whole prevailing religious concept of the day on it's head
 - The ineffectiveness of outward observances
 - *Colossians 2:6-17* and *20-23*, NLT
- **This is why the work of the New Covenant is a new heart and not a new set of rules**
 - This is why our **righteousness** is to be found in Christ and not our own

So, what we need is to be **renewed on the inside** (not cleaned on the outside) and we need a righteousness not our own (**Cf. the problem with religion**)

- *Philippians 3:2-9*, NLT
- Our greatest need is not **clean hands** and washing ourselves up on the outside, but **changed hearts**
 - Holiness begins in the heart, and only God can change our hearts toward holiness
 - *Ezekiel 36:25-27*, NLT
 - God **cleanses us**; gives us a **new heart**; puts **His spirit in us**
 - This is how the heart is **transformed** (and we cultivate that—*Proverbs 4:23*, NIV)
 - We cannot be casual about holiness—holiness doesn't just happen... we have to pursue
 - But that pursuit has its genesis in **God's work in us** and **it works outward**, not inward
 - *Philippians 2:13*, NASB

Obedience from the heart is true worship

- It does not mean that we have to wait until we "feel" like obeying (God, take away my desire)
- Rather, it means that we are determined to obey **for the glory of God**—and to do so truly, not merely externally
- Paul tells us that we ought to act "... **as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.**" (*Eph. 6:6*)
 - *Romans 2:28-29*, NLT
 - *Romans 6:15-19*, NIV

The good news is that we have clear final authority (God's word)

- We have been given a new heart that goes after God's word
- We have a prayer we can pray... *Psalms 139:23-24*, NASB

¹ David Platt, *Christ Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Nashville, TN; B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 204.