

Scripture versus Tradition (Mat. 15.1-20 Pt.2)

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Introduction

To complete our study of Matthew 15.1-20, we should begin with a review by which to set forth the focus of this message. The Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem raise a question that sets this section of the narrative in motion. **Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."**

On this occasion, the conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus emerges from their view of tradition in relation to Scripture. Based on their tradition, they question Jesus. The answer Jesus gives to their question is threefold: 1) Counter-answer to the Pharisees, 2) direct answer to the people, and 3) expanded answer (amplified answer) to the disciples. There are many things here to consider, so today we will discuss part two on this text: "Scripture versus Tradition."

1A. The counter-answer to the Pharisees (15.3-9)

1B. First, He frames the challenge plainly (v. 3)

Matthew says, **He answered them** (v. 3), but it is obvious that this "answer" is more of a *challenge* than it is an answer. Jesus replies with a question (v. 3), so we might think of it as a counter-question, **And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?** Here He places God's word of commandment back to back with their tradition to show how they conflict.

2B. Second, He defends the challenge pointedly (4-6)

He cites the fifth commandment: honor your father and mother. He puts it forth with the sanction of death attached to it (v. 4, **For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die, cf. Ex 20.12 with Lev 20.9).** All the commandments are clusters and each of the Ten Words gives one grape from each cluster. Speech is one grape on the fifth commandment cluster. Another grape in the fifth commandment cluster of honoring parents is financial support when parents are in need. However, the rabbinic tradition made this command void. They missed the true spirit of the command. By trickery of interpretation, Jesus says, they make pious claims *to* father and mother in breaking the law. **But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, ⁶ he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.** The idea is that if someone has money in the bank that could help aging parents, they can avoid giving to their parents by telling them that the money is devoted to God. This "avoiding" guts the commandment and thus voids it or makes it something useless.

3B. Third, He applies the challenge firmly (7-9)

You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ⁸ ""This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁹ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."''

Daily life and worship are a seamless garment. How you conduct yourself on Saturday may mean that your worship on Sunday is vain, useless, and without profit.

2A. Direct Answer to the people (10-11)

Jesus addresses the people who are there listening to all that is going on. He calls them to the specific duties of hearing and understanding. His answer is direct but it comes from a distinct angle because He concentrates on eating and not the washing of hands before eating. **And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."** This is a direct answer, but to a modified question!

Our Lord has His own teaching agenda in the conflicts that go on record for us. He *accents the central truth that defilement comes from within*, it comes from within the heart in the things that flow out from the center of our inmost being. God seeks the inner man of the heart, devotion of mind, and dedication to deed; these things go together (cf. the seamless garment again).

3A. Amplified Answer (vs. 15-20, to the disciples per Peter)

Peter seeks more explanation for himself and the disciples (cf. “to us”), and the Lord prods him forward: **But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us."** ¹⁶ **And he said, "Are you also still without understanding?"** ¹⁷ **Do you not see...** (15-17). Jesus then hones in on the ceremonial washing as something outward in contrast to matters of the heart.

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? ¹⁸ **But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.** ¹⁹ **For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.** ²⁰ **These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."**

Matters of the heart that show up in speech and other actions *morally* defile a person before God:

Eating with unwashed hands does not defile (that is human addition)

Foods are not unclean in themselves (that is human distortion)

What comes out of the heart (that is human perversion and depravity)

Clearly, the entire second table of the law (the last six commandments) is in this context, either directly or by implication (5th, dishonoring father and mother; 6th, murder; 7th, adultery and sexual immorality; 8th, theft; 9th, false witness and slander; 10th, implied in evil thoughts). What you think, do, and say come from the inner man of the heart. These things make for defilement and these things make for righteousness for out of the heart the mouth speaks.

Application

Running God’s commands through their tradition meat-grinder taints worship and ends up with human commandments instead of divine ones. Jesus is saying that they break God’s word, and that they do so for the sake of their tradition. The issue of Scripture in relation to tradition is no small matter, especially when our tradition serves as the basis for breaking God’s word. It is no small matter to replace God’s authority with human authority.

This is an important red flag. It is a significant word of caution for us all, for all who make claims to biblical truth. The way it works is that instead of throwing Scripture away and building a religious system from scratch, tradition grounds the breaking of Scripture *by using Scripture*. Thus, Jesus gives an example of how they *handle* Scripture in order to show how they *mishandle* it. Our job is to listen carefully and seek intelligent understanding. To engage careful listening in quest of intelligent understanding, we can cover some major highlights.

1) Types of tradition

There are different senses in the way we use the idea of tradition. a) Tradition versus Scripture (Mat 15.2-6) is here in our text; here tradition stands in contradiction to Scripture. b) There is also the use of tradition with regard to the oral preaching of the apostles that they gradually wrote down (“**So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter,**” 2 Thess 2.15). c) Finally, there is a good sense of tradition such as the reformed tradition. Pointedly, there is tradition as something good like the reformed tradition versus tradition as something bad like Roman Catholic tradition. Is this a fair assessment of Catholicism? This question brings us to another highlight.

2) Untangling legit tradition

To understand legitimate tradition, we need to distinguish between apostolic and post-apostolic tradition, and we need to clarify what is good and what is bad in post-apostolic

tradition. a) First, apostolic tradition has divine authority and makes up the foundation of the church. b) Second, regarding all post-apostolic tradition, it is bad when it is on an equal level with Scripture as done by Rome, and it is good when it is in a subordinate place in relation to Scripture. Self-consciously putting post-apostolic tradition into a fixed place of subordination is the glory of the Reformation. In this regard, note some statements from the reformed confessions. As we view them, consider this question: Do the things they say about Scripture and tradition apply to their own confessions?

WCF 1.10 The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

WCF 31.3 It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of His Church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with, reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in His Word.

WCF 31.4 All synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.

WLC 3 What is the word of God? A. The Holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.

WSC 2 What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him? A. The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

Cf. Belgic Confession (1561), Article 7, “neither do we consider of equal value any writing of men, however holy these men may have been, with those divine Scriptures; nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes as of equal value with the truth of God...”

Second Helvetic Confession (1566), II, 5, “We do likewise reject human traditions, which although they be set out with goodly titles, as though there were divine and apostolical...II, 4, “Therefore, in controversies of religion or matters of faith, we can not admit any other judge than God Himself, pronouncing by the Holy Scriptures what is true, what is false, what is to be followed, or what to be avoided.

WCF 20.2 God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

WCF 1.9 The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one) , it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

Surely, WCF, 31.4 makes the point of subordination in a categorical way: *Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.* Passages: Eph 2.20 (foundation is the apostles with Christ as chief cornerstone); Acts 17.11 (Berean spirit); 1 Cor 2.5 (faith is not based on wisdom of men but the power of God per apostolic testimony).

2) The tradition pitfall of self-deception

The Pharisees and scribes were guardians and expounders of the law (students, guardians, and expositors of OT law, and as part for the whole, of the OT). Nonetheless, they were so far a field, so wide of the mark that it is unbelievable. This is a pungent warning: one may actually think that outward and external acts of religion and good deeds are the core of true faith. Such a person is self-deceived in his or her use of tradition to nullify Scripture. We have to ask ourselves, “If I am guilty, how can I get out of this trap?”

There are some hints in the form of questions that help us see ourselves in truth to avoid this trap: a) is my concentration on the outward versus the inward (knowing that both count, of course)? b) Do I play a part when I take up religious acts? c) Am I willing to ask these questions of myself and to say to the Lord, “O Lord help me see myself by the mirror of your holy word, because I know that I tend to wear a mask, even when I look in the mirror.” d) Am I willing, always willing, to get more perspective on what I believe about truth and conduct? Those who are self-deceived will not ask these questions in careful self-examination. They will point the finger at others and say like the scribes, “why do those so and sos do such and such?”

3) Interpretation and Tradition

Authority of Scripture and its interpretation is crucial. We must acknowledge the fact of interpretation and distinguish interpretation from the authority of Scripture. There are interpretation traditions and knowing that fact is healthy. For example, the Roman Catholic Church gives the interpretation work of the pope and majesterium equal authority with Scripture. Here is a simple way to back up my point: the evidence is in the fact that their tradition settles all interpretation disputes. Problem: their tradition is simply another interpretation (may be good at times). This leads to this important and relevant question for us. Can we say, “The Reformation was a great turning point, but the reformed tradition is fallible? Can we practice the claim that confessions are self-consciously subordinate to Scripture?”

4) Open-minded humility and the best types of tradition

The best types of tradition, of course, are apostolic-ultimately-NT tradition and the reformed tradition of biblical interpretation. In working within the reformed tradition, do I work primarily with Scripture acknowledging that the reformed faith is a guiding grid?

Do I practice *OMH*, which includes the following? It includes a willingness to compare views, to empathize with opposing views and with the people who hold them (even despite the people who hold them because even a liar may have a good argument in favor of the truth). It involves willingness to dialogue with an objective posture. We should note that having conviction that has substance the best starting point for meaningful discussion in contrast to taking a dogmatic stance; we need more substance than stance. To be *humble* means to acknowledge the problem of sin, of my sin (acknowledge being all too often a mask wearer), to take the risk of being wrong, and to show love. Showing love means that we communicate and are approachable, not arrogant, proud, and standoffish. It means that we only criticize when we must and when we must do so, we do so with kit gloves; we do so with the gentleness of the person taking a speck out of another person’s eye.

5) Argument and the best types of tradition

What should be driving us is a determination to honor God in worship and in life and by good interpretation of Scripture, which is painstaking, involves differences and argument. However, this has to be a long-term goal; it is work in progress, as we are works in progress. Arguing over time (in a long term way) is extremely important because we want God’s word not just our opinions on it. Therefore, we must exercise continual re-examination.

We must study and argue in discipleship learning. We must do our own homework as a responsibility of believer-priests. We must make responsible decisions. Where we forget things

or seem to need more light, we must humbly review and reconsider. Jesus says, “Give attention intelligently” and He asks, “Do you not understand?”

We must argue (cf. Jesus’ example here of grounding sharp claims). Engage arguments with others. We should do so without an adversarial flavor. For *any* position that claims Scriptural basis, we need to consider it openly, looking for the voice of God versus our own opinions. This includes the reformed tradition. We are to argue but not strive as we wait on the Spirit to give repentance (2 Tim 2.24-25).

Learning includes human interpretation. It includes the history of the church, history that we need to take into view. This history is fallible but a teacher (cf. how we view WCF and the confession’s own reference to helps). The possibilities of false, even radically false interpretations are great; we need to be alert and humble with OMH lest we succumb as well (cf. the self-deception pitfall again).

Finally, at stake is true religion and genuine obedience. How we handle Scripture is basic to disobedience to the commandments and how we handle Scripture is central in obedience. This is a root/fruit or foundation/superstructure issue. A humble approach to the Scriptures is vital in both our personal study and our interaction with one another in one-anothering love. This is how we get at the root of sin in our hearts so that the fruits of righteousness will grow in our lives. Then we will make headway in the opposite of the sins mention by our Lord. Then out of the heart will come good thoughts, honor to parents, the promotion of life, sexual purity and the sanctity of marriage, honesty, and truth.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God in humble recognition of our sins and with earnest submission to His word that saves and sanctifies. To the Lord Jesus be all glory and honor, now and forevermore, Amen.