

Introduction

Walking on the water and healing at Gennesaret are contextual for the reaction of the Pharisees that we have recorded in Matthew, chapter 15. The spreading fame of Jesus that came about after the death of John not only reached the provincial palace of the Roman ruler, Herod, but it also caught the attention of the leaders of Israel. "Then" (15.1) indicates another indefinite point in time when Jesus moved quickly through the door opened wide by John. As His fame spread so did opposition. Thus, the narrative (15-20) contains some oil and water elements that converge as background for the final week of our Lord's work on earth before the resurrection, which begins at chapter 21. The oil and water elements lay down the foundation for the coming post-resurrection church (both then and now). They include special training of the apostles and rising opposition from the leaders, both emerging in the context of gospel proclamation in word and deed by our Lord. These things intertwine because opposition not only builds toward the crucifixion but it also gives us insight into the gospel by contrast (contrast that leaps forward with positive teaching).

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."**

These religious leaders from the big city teach the people and guide them in the things of God. They have a worldview that governs their thinking, and they think that their worldview reflects the truth regarding how people can have a right relationship with the God of the Hebrew Bible. They think they know best as to how the covenant people of Israel can live clean lives in honor to the Lord of the covenant keeping God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Naturally (or unnaturally), they have a turf to protect and they view divergence from that turf with suspicion. Therefore, they view the teachings of Christ with suspicion. In their eyes, Jesus diverges from the truth in radical ways. That would be okay if He stayed in some obscure corner teaching some unclear doctrine. To the contrary, however, Jesus taught clearly and His fame spread everywhere.

What made matters even worse is the fact that Jesus confronted and rebuked the religious leaders calling them hypocrites, a brood of vipers, and an evil and adulterous generation (cf. in the Sermon on the Mount, Mat. 5-7, in the debate about the Sabbath, Mat. 12.1-14, and in the discussion about the sign of Jonah, Mat. 12. 38-42). Surely, that message spread along with His fame. Thus, their adamant opposition is a lingering background fact that Matthew comments on in 12.14, saying, **"The Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him"** (strong words for religious people). They do what they do as representatives of the official religion in Jerusalem for they come "from Jerusalem" (15.1) to do the bidding of the chief priests and elders, the key figures later in the suffering of Jesus at Jerusalem (16.21).

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 one of this text: "Hypocritical Speech."

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

Without a doubt, this is a challenge, a laying-down of the gauntlet. The Lord is pressing things home to the Pharisees in this first step in the answer to their question of verse 2.

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. Of course, the question is a suppressed statement (as was the question of the Pharisees). Jesus is saying that they break God’s word, and that they do so for the sake of their tradition. The issue is Scripture versus tradition, and the challenge is that there is some very bad thinking at the core of their religion because they **break the commandment of God** from a religious posture. 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) and we will discuss it further in part two on this text.

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

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. 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.**). How all parties concerned apply this commandment is radically important. The parties are father, mother, and children (young and old along with all authority figures). Simply put, how children speak to their parents can lead to the death penalty, just speech mind you! It is easy to note that fathers must cultivate honor of moms in the home or they break the fifth commandment. Likewise, mothers must cultivate the honor of dads in the home or they break the spirit of this commandment. It has double emphasis for the wife who is to honor the authority of her husband already as wife; now she has the additional responsibility of cultivating this honor in her children; it is a prime directive.

Speech is one grape on the fifth commandment cluster (cf. all the commandments are clusters and each of the Ten Words gives one grape from each cluster). Another grape in the fifth commandment cluster of honoring parents is by financial support when parents are in need. However, the rabbinic tradition made this command void, even though it is so natural, intuitive, and universally recognized. They missed the true spirit of the command. By trickery of interpretation, by claims, Jesus says, that you make *to* father and mother you break 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. The word of God is not thwarted or defeated (His word does not return void), but people miss its proper use when they misuse it or use it for selfish ends. Such conduct misses the benefit of the law and fails miserably at obedience to it. This is not religion but anti-religion! It is the religion of snakes.

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.'"

A hypocrite is a mask wearer, one who acts a part, a person “contented with an outside show, including not deliberate deceivers merely, but the self-deceived, or those who really mistake the outward for the inward, the apparent for the real” (Alexander, *Matthew*, 410). They pay lip service to God and lack a heart for God. The result is that their worship has no value (it is vain, v. 9). Running God’s commands through their tradition meat-grinder taints worship and ends up with human commandments instead of divine ones.

Inescapably, the fifth commandment and worship with integrity are inseparable (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. In effect, He says, “you are to hear something very important and give intelligent attention to the meaning of the words I speak.” The Pharisees are listening, but Jesus addresses the people in particular. 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: ‘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.

You might think from His words that the OT eating laws and rituals regarding clean and unclean meats had no relevance whatever, as if they did not exist. This is similar to the statements about sacrifice in which the Lord says that He hates sacrifice, as if they were merely human inventions that displeased Him. However, both sacrifices and laws regarding clean and unclean foods were part of OT law that God gave to His covenant people. The point is that no food that is intrinsically unclean and thus sinful to eat, just as there is no drink, no alcohol that is evil in itself. This point *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.

That it sounds like the ceremonial law was irrelevant (that Jesus contradicts what God commands) is what gives power to the language here. It forces the listener to discern carefully before jumping onto some bandwagon. Do not draw hasty conclusions. “Listen carefully, reflect, mediate, and work your way to the meaning behind the form of my words” is what Jesus is saying.

With all the cautions, who is it that fails to listen carefully and seek intelligent understanding? Yes, the Pharisees as teachers of the law miss the point and take offense (v. 12). They no doubt concluded that Jesus contradicted the OT food laws along with the additions from their tradition.

Jesus *did* know that they took offense and He does not seek to tone things down before the teachers of the law (12). He is fulfilling the Father’s purpose of bringing in the kingdom (in an accelerated way after the death of John). That purpose must include the destruction, the uprooting, of the tradition that uses but misuses Scripture (v. 13, **He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.”**) He was out to destroy the credibility of the Pharisaic doctrines. He emphatically and purposely contradicted their tradition. Regarding the opponents, it is sufficient to leave them to themselves for their destruction. Without spiritual vision, the teachers of the law will fall into the ditch of destruction leading other blind ones along with them (v. 14, **Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”**). To leave to

go their own ways is to judge them severely. We do not want the Lord to let us go our way in our foolish spiritual blindness.

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

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."**

To neglect the human fabrication of hand baptizing (and other similar additions, cf. Mark’s parallel account) does not make a person *ceremonially* defiled, but matters of the heart that show up in speech and other actions do *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)

Concluding remarks

When I think back over this passage, my thoughts run in many directions at the same time. Therefore, I have to try to tackle application from this passage in two sermons. To conclude the message today, let us concentrate on hypocritical speech knowing that this limits our focus leaving many things untouched.

1) Problem

The problem is hypocrisy. It is putting on an act. We have to ask the question, “who is the real hypocrite?” We can say, “Will the real hypocrite please stand and identify him or herself” (like the old TV show, “will the real so and so please stand up.”). Of course, he will not do so.

Now here is the subtlety of the problem. We are all good at pointing our fingers at other people and calling them hypocrites. Probably, when we do this, we reveal the fact that hypocrisy is a key sin in our own lives (cf. Rom. 2.1, when you judge others you are guilty of doing the very thing!). Then we are the real play actors.

The knotty problem is that we have difficulty seeing ourselves. We tend to be mask wearers, even when, and especially when, we look in the mirror. We hide ourselves behind our backs so we cannot see our true sin. We do not want to see and admit our own ugliness (cf. the princess, the mad man, and the monster in the forest. The monster is the mad man’s reflection on the surface of the water that reflects his true monster-like ugliness). True religion of the heart will look here with horror, and then cling for dear life to the Lord Jesus!

Hypocrisy is acting. It means conducting yourself in private one way and in public another way. It surfaces in speech. Just think about how you speak at home *to* your spouses or your parents versus how you speak to them in front of the pastor or in front of other people, or in front of God (but before God is what we forget). The Pharisees are great at street corner religion. You are a hypocrite when you think about and talk to the mother of your children or the father of your children about hers or his sins in a finger-pointing, critical, censorious, unloving, and self-serving way (cf. honor fathers and mothers). That is so because you are not looking in the right direction, which is at your own heart and thought life from which comes all that defiles (cf.

15.20, 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.").

2) Solution

The solution to this problem is first to admit that this is your problem, not the other person's. In the first place, it is your problem. You say in your heart, "I am guilty of this." You pray, "Lord, I am guilty of this, forgive me, and help me to turn away from this sin." The key here is to judge your own heart before the Lord by His word.

Of course, if you are ignorant because you do not read and study His word, then you will lack the strength to effectively judge yourself, see clearly, and have integrity in your speech. You will not be able to control your tongue or prevent yourself from finger pointing. Whenever you think you see someone's faults, you must, if you are a baptized disciple of Christ, you must bite your tongue and turn your thoughts to Christ confessing your true ugliness of heart! It is this acknowledgement, this confession, this way of repenting day by day that marks a Christian!

Remember, Christians are sinners, and they are no better than other people are, but what sets them apart is a heart relationship with Christ. A heart relationship to Christ is a matter of your thought life. You think on the things that are pure, true, and good. You believe all things and think the best of others; that is love (a key in its description in 1 Cor 13).

You forgive because God forgave you in Christ. Forgiving love is a key in the solution to hypocrisy. How is this so? It is so because you can only forgive when you have a sense that God forgave you. If you truly acknowledge that He forgave you much, then you must, you will, hold your tongue in judging others. You will take on a forgiving spirit and in stark contrast to hypocrisy, you will not play act your Christianity. The solution begins and continues with a heart relationship to Jesus Christ as your prophet, priest, and king.

Let us fall down before the majesty of Jesus-Messiah and honor Him in our hearts as well as with our lips!