



The St J's Group

Matthew 15:1-20 - 'Out of the mouth'

Passage, Talk Notes and Questions

Please feel free to take these talk notes home with you and you may wish to find some time during this week to consider the questions below.

1. Talk Passage – Matthew 15:1-20

1 Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, **2** 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!'

3 Jesus replied, 'And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?'

4 For God said, "Honour your father and mother" and "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death." **5** But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is "devoted to God," **6** they are not to "honour their father or mother" with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. **7** You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

8 "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."

10 Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen and understand. **11** What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.'

12 Then the disciples came to him and asked, 'Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?'

13 He replied, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. **14** Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.'

15 Peter said, 'Explain the parable to us.'

16 'Are you still so dull?' Jesus asked them. **17** 'Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? **18** But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. **19** For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. **20** These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.'

2. Talk Notes

2.1 Introduction

- What is on your heart at the moment? What do you think about in the middle of the night or in a resting moment? What currently absorbs your thoughts?
 - Health issues either concerning yourself or others?
 - Financial worries and making ends meet?
 - Difficulties at home, in your workplace or community? Or
 - Improving and developing your relationship with God?
- Jesus addresses three groups of people in our passage:
 - The Pharisees (verses 1-9)
 - The Crowds (verses 10-11)
 - The Disciples (verses 12-20)
- Each group is concerned about an external matter:
 - The Pharisees about TRADITION
 - The Crowds about CLEANLINESS
 - The Disciples about TEACHERS
- Jesus encourages us and each of the three groups he addresses to focus internally rather than externally. Jesus reminds us and them that 'At the heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.' *For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.* (Matthew 15:19)

2.2 Pharisees and TRADITION (verses 1-9)

- The first group Jesus addresses are 'some Pharisees and teachers of the law' (Matthew

2.4 Disciples and TEACHING (verses 12-14)

- Finally Jesus addresses the disciples who are evidently concerned about his treatment of visiting dignitaries and their TEACHING: 'Then the disciples came to him and asked, Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?' (Matthew 15:12)
- They like the crowds would have been brought up to respect what the Pharisees and teachers of the law had to say. Jesus points out to them not to be fooled by the externals and to see the Pharisees and teachers of the law for what they really were: false teachers. He uses two images to do so.
 - The first was that any plant that the Father had not planted would be rooted up: 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. (Matthew 15:13) Jesus was not saying that false teaching would be rooted out, but false teachers. In other words, the Pharisees were not part of God's planting.
 - The second is that the Pharisees and teachers of the law saw themselves as guides for the spiritually blind. But Jesus says that these leaders were blind themselves, and so the blind were leading the blind: 'Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.' (Matthew 15:14)
- Jesus explains brilliantly in his famous sermon on the mount that you can always tell a tree by its fruit: 'Each tree is recognised by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. (Luke 6:44-45)

2.5 Conclusion (verses 15-20)

- The disciples are clearly confused. It takes Peter to ask Jesus: 'Explain the parable to us.' 'Are you still so dull?' Jesus asked them. (Matthew 15:15-6)
- Jesus summarises for them, and us, what he has been trying to convey to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the crowds and to them. Sin originates in our hearts: *For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.* (Matthew 15:19). We don't become unclean by what we eat: 'Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? (Matthew 15:17)
- The Pharisees, the teachers of the law, the crowds, the disciples and some of us are all unfortunately focused on the externals. The Pharisees on TRADITION, The crowds on CLEANLINESS, the disciples on TEACHING. Jesus wants them and us to understand that: 'At the heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.'

3. Questions to consider at home

3.1 Why did the Pharisees and teachers of the law make their journey from Jerusalem to Galilee?

3.2 Can you think of any religious traditions that we follow today that are not prescribed in the Bible?

3.3 What does Jesus have to say about 'the tradition of the elders'? Is Jesus against tradition?

3.4 What was so radical about Jesus' teaching on cleanliness?

3.5 In what ways were the 'blind leading the blind'?

3.6 If you can tell a tree by its fruit, what sort of fruit is being displayed in your life and the life of your church?

3.7 What would you say is at the 'heart of the matter' in your church?

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15:1). They are obviously a high powered delegation as they have travelled over 100 miles and for seven days 'from Jerusalem' to Galilee to deal with Jesus.

- They are upset with Jesus, a Pharisee himself, for not setting a good example to his disciples: *'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!'* (Matthew 15:2)
- The issue at hand is one of TRADITION. Over the centuries since the Jews' return from Babylonian captivity, over 600 religious traditions had been added to God's laws. These traditions were passed down by word of mouth until about 200 AD when they were finally compiled and written in a volume called the Mishnah.
- One entire section of the Mishnah deals with the washing of hands. It specified the various blessings that must be recited during washing and how much water must be used for effective ceremonial purification. For example "if a man poured water over one hand with a single rinsing, his hand is clean; but if over both hands with a single rinsing they are unclean unless he pours over them a quart or more of water.' The Jews were required by this tradition to wash their hands before eating and after eating, and also between courses of food.
- And so, when we read in verse 2 that the disciples of Jesus did not wash their hands when they ate bread, we should not imagine that they held their bread with grubby hands all caked with dirt and grime. They probably washed their hands, like we do, before touching any food. What they did not do was the cumbersome hand-washing ritual required before each meal. They, along with Jesus, had failed to follow one of the 600 'traditions of the elders' that had grown up in last 400 years.
- We too have a variety of religious TRADITIONS. Things that we do that are not prescribed in the Bible. For example it is not a sin:
 - To pray with your eyes open, or to pray while standing or out loud in a corporate setting.
 - To forget to say grace before you eat a meal.
 - To sing more than one hymn at a time in a worship set.
- To insist that we must always keep these outward forms, handed down by TRADITION, without exception, would make us just like the Pharisees. Rather than being so obsessed with outward forms, let us be more concerned about our inward obedience to God's commandments. Do we love God's commandments and seek to obey them at all times?
- What upset Jesus was that the Pharisees were using their 'traditions of the elders' to avoid obeying God's commandments! *'And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, "Honour your father and mother" and "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death." But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is "devoted to God," they are not to "honour their father or mother" with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.* (Matthew 15:3-6)
- God has commanded us to honour our parents: *'Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.'* (Exodus 20:12). We are to do this by obeying them when we are young, and providing for their needs when they are old. We are told in 1 Timothy 5:8: *'Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.'*
- But the Pharisees were using their 'traditions of the elders' to evade God's commandments. When their aged parents came to them for support, the Pharisees would tell them that they had already pledged their money and resources as a gift devoted for God's use. Hence they don't have the means to support their parents. But

later on, after their parents had died, they could use their 'traditions of the elders' to redeem back all the money and resources they had given to God.

- The irony of it all, is these people claimed to honour their ancient elders who had made these traditions, but in doing so they dishonoured their own elders at home! And then they conveniently used these 'traditions of the elders' to keep all their wealth to themselves.
- All their outward acts of devotion to God were only a pretext for their own selfish desires. No wonder that Jesus called them: *'You hypocrites!'* (Matthew 15:7)
- Jesus accurately describes them using verses from Isaiah 29:13: *These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.*" (Matthew 15:8-9)
- Jesus looked into the hearts of these scribes and Pharisees, and He saw no inward devotion in them. What happens when Jesus looks into hearts? What does he see
- The outward acts of worship of these scribes and Pharisees were meaningless since they were not produced by an inward devotion. Are our outward acts of worship similarly flawed?

2.3 Crowd and CLEANLINESS (verses 10-11)

- The second group that Jesus addresses are the crowds who are evidently concerned about other external matters namely CLEANLINESS.
- Jesus explains to them and to us today that what goes into our mouths does not make us unclean, but what comes out of them. *'Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.'* (Matthew 15:10-11)
- The Old Testament has a lot to say about CLEANLINESS especially the Book of Leviticus. There were numerous laws and regulations that distinguished between clean and unclean things. These distinctions primarily revolve around ritual purity and were meant to guide the Israelites in their religious practices. For example:
 - Animals: The Israelites were provided with a list of animals that were considered clean and suitable for consumption, and those that were considered unclean and not to be eaten. Clean animals included cattle, sheep, goats, deer, and certain types of fish with fins and scales. Unclean animals included pigs, rabbits, camels, shellfish, and various birds of prey.
 - Ritual Practices: Certain bodily discharges, such as those associated with childbirth or leprosy, rendered individuals unclean. Touching a dead body or being in contact with a person who had died also caused ritual impurity.
 - Dietary Restrictions: In addition to the classification of animals as clean or unclean, specific dietary laws prohibited the consumption of blood, certain fats, and the meat of animals that had died of natural causes or had not been slaughtered according to prescribed rituals.
 - Clothing and Fabrics: Certain fabrics, such as those made of a blend of different materials (e.g., wool and linen), were considered unclean and were not to be worn.
 - Skin Diseases: The Old Testament provided guidelines on identifying and dealing with various skin diseases. Those afflicted with such conditions were considered unclean and were required to undergo rituals of purification before being considered ritually pure again.
- What Jesus said to the crowd would have really have shocked them. It would certainly have utterly shocked the visiting dignitaries from Jerusalem. He said that they and us are not made clean or unclean by eating certain foods, observing certain ritual practices or even wearing certain clothes. It is what we say, think and do that makes us unclean. *'At the heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.'*