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Text: Matthew 15:1-20
Title: God's Commands or Man's Tradition?

Intro: Matthew 15:1-20 is another record of Jesus being confronted by the scribes and Pharisees.

The scribes and Pharisees were religious leaders of Israel at that time. **They were image-conscience leaders.** In other words, they pursued outward acts and appearance of devotion. They made sure that everyone knew how religious they were. They literally wore their religion – making extra-wide phylacteries for their foreheads and putting extra-long fringes on their robes (Matthew 23:5). They fasted openly and prayed long prayers in public (Matthew 6:16; 23:14). They also made a grand show whenever they gave alms to the poor (Matthew 6:2,5).

According to verse 1, this particular group of scribes and Pharisees came to Jesus from Jerusalem. They were not the local religious leaders who were based in Galilee. These were the ones of Jerusalem – the headquarters of all Jewish religious affairs. They had taken the trouble to make 68.3 miles trip all the way north to Galilee to join in with the local Pharisees to find fault with Jesus and His disciples. They sought to convince the people that Jesus and His disciples were a deviant sect. The local Pharisees in Galilee had already tried to do this several times according to Matthew 9:11,34; 12:2,14. But none of them could resist the power and wisdom with which Jesus spoke.

Several things to note about Jesus' confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees.

I. Jesus' Meeting with the scribes and Pharisees: Verses 2-9

- A. Their accusation: Verse 2, they accused Jesus of breaking the Mosaic law by permitting His disciples to ignore the ceremonial hand washing ritual before eating. The ceremonial hand washing ritual was an outward form. Outward forms are not taught in the Bible. We see in Verse 2 that outward forms are mentioned as the 'tradition of the elders'. These were a collection of teachings of Jewish rabbis based on their own interpretations and applications of God's Law. These traditions were passed down by word of mouth. Around 200 AD they were finally compiled and written in a volume called the Mishnah. It included prayers and blessings for use on different occasions and detailed rules of conduct and bodily purity.

According to their tradition, Jews were to recite various blessings during washing. Jews also were to use a specified amount of water for effective ceremonial purification. For example, "If a man poured water over one hand with a single rinsing, his hand was clean; but if over both hands with a single rinsing they were unclean, unless he poured 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 between courses of food.

Eating with unwashed hands was a serious offense. According to Matthew Henry, one Jewish rabbi declared “that to eat with unwashed hands is as great a sin as adultery.” Another rabbi said that he would rather die than transgress the tradition of the elders!

Not all tradition is bad. Tradition becomes a bad thing when it contradicts God’s word. We are not called to live out traditions, but to live out God’s word.

The scribes and Pharisees raised their traditions to the same lever of authority as God’s word. Let us be mindful that no man-made tradition equates God’s Word in authority.

- B. His condemnation: Verses 3-9, Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees because they were rejecting God in order to uphold their traditions. They were teachers of corrupt thinking. They thought their traditions would bring them closer to God while rejecting God.

Jesus speaks concerning their corruption in Verses 3-6. The scribes and Pharisees were living outside of God’s law. Particularly, Jesus mentioned the 5th commandment to reveal their corrupt hearts. They were in violation of the 5th commandment—honor your father and mother. The scribes and Pharisees twisted God’s law to allow themselves to ignore the responsibility of honoring their parents. They called it ‘corban’...a gift dedicated to the Lord and was not considered income they would have to share with their parents.

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. Consequently, they didn’t have the means to support their parents. But later, after their parents had died, they could use their tradition to redeem back all the money and resources they had given to God. They used their tradition to evade their duty to their parents. When people don’t want to obey God in a certain area, they cleverly twist the word of God, to avoid doing what’s commanded.

Jesus speaks concerning their character (Verses 7-9): Character is the mental and moral quality distinctive to an individual. Christian character is character lived out in reverence for and respect for God, as opposed to simply honoring man. The “fear of God” is the biblical terminology for Christian character. Inward devotion to God is the very heart and soul of Christian character.

Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites. The word “hypocrites” describes those who worship outwardly without inward devotion. The word “hypocrite” is derived from a Greek word which means ‘actor’ and it was commonly used for those who acted in ancient Greek dramas. The actors put on different masks to portray different characters.

The hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy of vain worshipers.

Isaiah 29:13 says, ***“And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.”***

The scribes and Pharisees were not true worshipers. They worshiped outwardly with no inward reverence for God. Jesus said John 4:23, ***“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (NIV).*** The Pharisees and scribes did not worship God with awe, abandonment, and life. They had outward form with no inward reverence for God.

II. Jesus’ Meeting with the People: Verses 10-11 Jesus tells the crowd that uncleanness is not caused by what goes into a person’s mouth but rather by what comes out! The crowd witnessed Jesus’ rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees. A rebuke that revealed their lack of inward devotion and obedience to God.

III. Jesus’ Meeting with the disciples and Peter: Verses 12-20

The disciples were concerned about Jesus offending the scribes and Pharisees. It may be that while Jesus was in the act of speaking the Pharisees and scribes waved their hands in disgust and left the scene. Verse 13, Jesus spoke of plants which represented the religious teachers who shunned Jesus and His teachings. They will be uprooted and thrown away simply because they were not planted by God; instead, the religious teachers were seeds sown by the enemy, the devil (Matthew 13:38-39).

According to verse 14 Jesus said the ministry of the scribes and Pharisees was to the blind—the blind leads the blind. ‘This is an idiom and a metaphor used to describe a situation where a person who knows nothing is getting advice and help from another person who knows almost nothing’ (Wikipedia).

Verses 15-17, Peter did not get what Jesus said. Peter was raised a good Jew. Jesus said to Peter what you eat may make you sick, but it does not make you a sinner. It is not about the hands, but the heart. Sin starts on the inside and works its way out, not the other way around. Sin is always ‘potential’ before it becomes ‘actual.’

Jesus explained in Verse 18 that the human heart is the ultimate source of defilement.

It is naturally sinful. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that, ***“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”*** And because the human heart is sinful, it will keep on producing sinful character, including the evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies which are listed in Verse 19 of our text. Jesus said that these are the things that defile a man.

Peter did not get it. He would not get it until Acts 10 when he had a great vision.

Conclusion: Jesus wanted them to be most concerned about inward defilement rather than outward defilement.