

Jesus the True Guide

Matthew 15:1-20

Introduction

- We're coming to the end of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee before he sets off across the lake and then on to Jerusalem.
- In Jerusalem, all of his ministry comes to a head as he journeys to the cross.
- In these scenes we are watching his ministry, his preparation, seeing his character revealed, his purposes explained, and noticing how various people respond to him.
- All of us have to come to grips with who he is (**Who is Jesus?**).
 - And, if we're going to be his disciples (i.e., followers) then we have to trust him and follow him where he is leading and *the way* he is leading.

Traditions: In the narrative today, we are going to see that Jesus' favorite opponents (i.e., the Pharisees) are unable to accept who he is or follow where he is leading because of the roadblock of their traditions and rituals. But, make no mistake, their rituals are a symptom, a surface manifestation of the deeper problem, the problem that they want to be in control of their lives and have no desire to relinquish that control to Jesus.

Wedding: Marriage is practiced around the globe but the rituals that accompany it are often widely different (even if the religion is the same). You'll find weddings range from short affairs to multi-day parties. In one German tradition, the couple saws a log together to symbolize their teamwork (come for the wedding, stay for the lumberjack competition). But think about the traditions we've invented to celebrate weddings:

- While bride's in the west have worn wedding rings for centuries, the habit of men wearing a wedding ring wasn't established until the 1940s or 50s in America.
- While white has been a popular color for wealthy brides when choosing a gown, most brides just wore their best gown. The white gown was popularized by Queen Victoria in 1840, but other brides wanted to show their wealth (not their purity) by wearing a white gown. Brilliant white dresses were not widely popular in America until the 1930s.
- And don't get me started on the origins of bridal parties, bouquet tosses, bad bridesmaid speeches, awkward DJs, sand pouring, unity candles, and more. Not to mention, **where in the Bible is any of it.**
- There are *so many traditions* (and some of them are really good and meaningful) but, if we're not careful, these traditions that are meant to symbolize something powerful and connect us to a history of meaningful beliefs will get in the way of the heart of the ceremony.
- I often tell a bride and groom during pre-marital counseling when talk about the marriage ceremony: I don't care what your colors are, how many tiers your cake has, or whether you play the Cupid Shuffle at the reception. I care that this public ceremony is a reflection of the gospel. That it provides a Christ-centered foundation for this new family. And that it initiates a lifelong covenant between this man and woman.

Our religious preferences, traditions, and rituals can similarly be misplaced. We can focus so much on all of the rituals and miss that **God desires a heart transformed by his grace.**

¹ 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.” ³ He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵ 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. ⁷ 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.’” ¹⁰ 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.” ¹² Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” ¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵ 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 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.”

1. The Potential Danger of Human Traditions (vv. 1-9)

The Current Situation: ¹ Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,

- Delegation from Jerusalem (not locals). Threat to power. The big wigs in town because Jesus is making too much noise.
- He’s had multiple encounters with various members of this sect of religious leaders.
- **Who are the Pharisees?** They are the precursors to Rabbinic Judaism (Rabbis existed but Rabbinic Judaism wasn’t developed yet).
 - As a movement they focused on holiness, often expanding on OT holiness codes (i.e., a fence around the Torah). As a result, the spirit is often violated for the letter (especially in modern situations which weren’t conceived in ancient times). E.g., can’t work or light a fire on *Shabbat* (Sabbath) but can hire a non-Jew to do it for you; can’t give an organ to a Gentile but can receive one.
 - The Torah is seen primarily as a book of laws rather than a story of God’s redemption or a promise of his future salvation.
 - Extra-biblical rules separate the ultra-faithful from the compromised (e.g., Oral Torah).
- We’ve seen them come at Jesus before (disciples eating wheat on Sabbath, healing on Sabbath, etc.).

The Criticizing Question: ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” You can tell by the entire interaction that they are **not asking the question sincerely**. There is an accusation behind the question (when you’re mad about something with your kids or spouse or roommate but you ask a question pretending; who ate my leftovers, left the light on, etc.). The Pharisees are *accusing* Jesus and his disciples of being ritually unclean.

- **What is ritual impurity?** God called his people to holiness (separation; set apart from the idolatrous nations) to reflect his holiness (set apart from creation; unstained by sin). As a result, there were a number of rituals, activities, and commandments the Israelites were instructed to follow to symbolize their *holiness*.
 - Holiness is good and commanded by God. But they mistook outward activity for inward holiness. They misunderstood the temporary nature of the ceremonies of the Torah (pointing to their fulfillment in Christ). We know, because the Bible tells us that Sabbath, the sacrifices, and the temple are fulfilled in Christ.
- The Torah (OT) does talk about handwashing, but not before eating but only for priests when handling sacrifices.
 - The Pharisees have created an extra rule. They’ve gone beyond the admonition of Scripture.
 - This isn’t about hygiene, it’s about ritual (“symbolic”) purity (cleansing defilement they picked up from life, Gentiles, etc.).
 - We often judge people by our values (success: jealous or admired; beauty: intimidated or impressed). They have made a new rule, then judged the disciples by it (*Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvinball; failure to join baseball team; Calvinball is an improvisational game in which the rules are made up as you go along; it’s fun for a while but lack of clear rules leads to lengthy argument between the participants as to who scored). The Pharisees are making up the rules as they go along it appears (*Whose Line?* The rules are made up and the points don’t matter).

The Revealing Response: ³ He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵ 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.

- “You’re worried about ‘handwashing’ yet you are violating the 5th commandment. You’re mad we’re not washing our hands but you’re not honoring your parents.”
 - Pointing out a lesser violation while ignoring a greater one (e.g., speck vs log).
 - “It is easier to cry against one thousand sins than to kill one of your own” (John Flavel).
- Using their own religious customs to violate God’s commands.
- **Korban** (scholars agree): designating funds for temple (e.g., trust) and using that to avoid caring for parents (e.g., 1 Tim 5:3-8; “honor” is financial).

Good vs. Bad Tradition: We are not a tradition-less people. Tradition is good. We come from a rich history of faithful Christians. The Bible is our final authority but we belong to a rich treasury

of faith in the church, a cloud of witnesses that have gone before. Tradition can be good, but even tradition must fall in obedience to Christ and Scripture. Tradition that is built on the gospel, the rule of faith, is helpful: it provides guardrails for our behavior, interpretation, and practice. But even tradition must fall in obedience to Christ and Scripture.

- The Pharisees are not follow the tradition of faith but *their own tradition*. They are going beyond Scripture.
 - I've seen this in spoken and unspoken dress codes in churches.

God's Words vs. Our Words: Notice the difference between the Pharisees accusation of the disciples versus Jesus' accusation of the Pharisees. The Pharisees point to a violation of *their* rules, Jesus points to a violation of God's rules. The Pharisees are trying to uphold their words, Jesus is upholding **God's words**. They're quoting their own tradition, Jesus is quoting the Word of God (e.g., Ex 20, 21; decalogue, 10 commandments).

- There's a big difference between what you or I say (e.g., human) vs. what God says.
- Fight false religion with the truth of God's Word.
 - Word-driven teaching and preaching (don't need my opinions or preferences).
 - Word-driven decisions and practices (not feelings or traditions).
- "Traditions become transgressions when they are valued above Scripture" (Quarles). The result is hollow worship that focuses on behavioral conformity rather than heart transformation.

Legalism, Self-Righteousness, Controlling Salvation: We are often like the Pharisees, creating rules and traditions that give us the illusion of righteousness.

- Self-centered (making you look better or God look better?)
- Self-righteousness (promote a goodness you can create and control or something that comes from God?)
- Self-interest (promote your lifestyle or convict your sin?) E.g., lists of sin.

The Pharisees had created a system that they controlled that allowed them to feel good about themselves and put them at the head of everything.

- Fundamentalism danger is that "I create the standard of holiness" so everyone else is condemned but me. This type of legalism will cannibalize any movement because no the circle will get smaller and smaller.

Issue of the Heart:

⁷ 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." Jesus condemns the Pharisees with Isaiah 29:13. They talk all the religious speak and perform all the rituals they want, but their hearts as distant from God. The Pharisees aren't the first to misunderstand the commands of the OT. They're not the last to fall into the trap of hypocrisy.

- They pray, not for worship, but for blessing. They think God *owes them* something because they are "being good." They are trying to control God through their behavior. In the end, they are using God for their own ends. They are not worshipping God but

themselves (i.e., prayed so you must bless me, communion so you must give me grace, walked in the door so you must heal me).

- Authentic worship is more than physical performance (spiritual affection compelled by faith).
 - Nominal or non-Christians getting married in a church vs. Christians getting married in a field.

What is the great danger to Christianity in our culture? **Hypocrisy**. Those who claim Christ but use him to justify their personal sins, preferences, politics, and opinions.

- “In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart” (John Bunyan).
- For every act of obedience, moment of prayer, song of worship we should consider where is my heart. Am I honestly worshipping and obeying God from my heart? Are my actions from faith? Am I doing this out of love or obligation?
 - Lying when singing: Do you mean what you say (at least prayerfully asking God to make it true)?

2. The Painful Deception of False Teachers (vv. 10-14)

Inside-Out Theological Problem: ¹⁰ 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.” Jesus calls the crowd to himself (they seem to always be around). I wonder if the Pharisees are around listening. They’ll “hear” but I wonder if they’ll understand (doubtful). We know that “hearing” and “listening” are different.

- Remember what parables do (separate true from false followers). Reveal to some and obscure others.

Jesus is making a profound point (ritual impurity surrounding eating and cleanliness is not nearly as important as the words we say). “True defilement is not external and ritual, but internal and moral”

- He is directly condemning the Pharisees understanding of righteousness and calling out their hypocrisy and sin.
- How would they respond? A humble heart will respond with repentance, an arrogant heart will respond with defensiveness and anger (e.g., “accountability is love”).
 - My experience is that often when people come asking for help they want you to fix their problem or tell them they’re right but they don’t want you to call them on their sin (“hear your opinion in a different/deeper voice”).

Anger the Pharisees: ¹² Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” ¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” Jesus and the disciples have a private conversation (not unusual in the Gospels). The disciples notice that they Pharisees are offended.

- Notice that the Pharisees are offended **at God's truth**. Be careful if God's Word ever offends you. It can console, rebuke, admonition, encourage but it should never be a stumbling block.

Let them be offended (some offense is ok). Let the Pharisees be mad (God uproots the false plants).

- Let them go, they are blind guides.
- False teachers will be offended by Jesus' teaching. They are spiritually blind and lead others to destruction. They spread superficial religion.

They Are Blind Guides: The blind leading the blind. They are bad shepherds, hired hands (e.g., John 10). They are trying to use and control people rather than serve and lead them.

- They misunderstood the purpose of the law (pointing out and punishing sin).
- They misunderstood holiness (separating from idolatry).
- They misunderstood righteousness (comes from God not human performance).
- They misunderstood salvation (a gift to be received not a prize to be earned).
- They misunderstood the identity of Jesus (the one of whom the law promised, in whom all the rituals of Israel are fulfilled, and the one who is the locus of salvation).

The Torah is meant to be life-giving, full of wisdom, teaching and correcting us. It is a mirror that exposes our sins and shortcomings. And, ultimately, it points us to righteousness found in the Messiah, the Savior coming to rule and reign. We see the **blindness** of the Pharisees in their inability to see that Jesus is the true end of the law. In him it is fulfilled.

Are We Like the Pharisees?: "We can drift from God with our Bibles open in front of us. Although we assume activities intended for growth in godliness — prayer, fellowship, Bible reading — are immune, we can still fail to bring God glory through them. The Pharisees had this problem. Jesus told them: 'You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life' (John 5:39–40). The Pharisees searched the Scriptures, devoted their lives to obeying the Law of Moses but they missed the bright neon sign flashing "Messiah." **The Pharisees knew God's word, but they didn't recognize Jesus.** Imagine taking an interest in some famous movie star. You study their biography, see all their movies, and watch every interview but they walk into your house and you don't recognize them. We marvel at the blindness of the Pharisees, yet some of us have the same problem.

- We have the same problem when we stack up flash cards of memorized verses, hoard books of theological knowledge, and fill our schedule with Christian activity but don't abide in Jesus and glorify him in our hearts, when we seek the knowledge *about* God but never actually *meet with* God – when the knowledge we seek never gets into our hearts. If that is us, we are blind guides. We can't lead others if we can't lead ourselves.

3. The Inward Transformation of the Gospel (vv. 15-20)

¹⁵ 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 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.”

The Explanation: Peter asks for an explanation. Peter is the spokesman (always speaking up or jumping out first). Peter might be the loudmouth but the whole group (y'all) didn't get it.

- We'd think the disciples would get it by now but they still don't. That should give us hope and give us pause.

Eating is just a part of being human. Eat what you want, the result is going to be the same. Even “ritually pure” food ends up in the same place as the rest of it.

- What comes out (via the mouth) is from the heart. Your words (specifically) and your actions (generally) are evidence of the state of your heart. “Defilement” and “impurity” are not a ritual thing but a moral thing.
 - That's why Jesus elevates the 10 commandments in the Sermon on the Mount (adultery to lust, murder to anger, etc.).

Sin vs. Ritual Impurity: They should be *way more concerned* about the sins of the heart than the food they eat. Being worried about “hand washing” for “ritual purity” but ignoring “evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, false witness, slander, etc.” is crazy.

- We do the same thing: “I love the Word.” “I'm a member of XYZ church.” “Pray for XYZ.” But our hearts and our actions prove this wrong. The Bible becomes a talism, prayer becomes a birthday wish, church becomes a good luck charm and discipleship and faith are nowhere to be found.
 - They have clean hands but evil thoughts, wicked deeds, and sinful words.

Rituals vs. Gospel: Our greatest need is not cleaner hands but changed hearts. Pursuing good behavior without inward transformation is a false path. At best it leads to hypocrisy.

- I'm not saying your behavior doesn't matter. I'm saying that when grace captivates your heart, it liberates you from the shackles of man-made tradition and compels you to God-directed obedience.
 - Everyone has a system of righteousness. Everyone believes in salvation by something. For some it salvation by voting a particular way. Or salvation by recycling. Or salvation by parenting, education, etc.
 - Jesus is above all those things. In one sense, “nothing matters but Jesus and his kingdom” (Ashford). In other, because Jesus is King and Lord of all, everything and everyone matters. Putting something (even something important) above what is ultimate (Jesus) will distort its value and importance in your life (even religion).
- In the Pharisees we see how sinful hearts corrupt even good actions (giving to the temple).

How Can I Get a New Heart?:

- “And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my

statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezek 11:19-20).

- “I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart” (Jer 24:7).
- “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17).

A new heart only comes from Christ. You have to recognize your inability to save yourself, repent of your sin (both the overt rebellion and the hypocritical self-righteousness). Place all of your trust wholly in Jesus, both now and forever, in life and death. You trust him to lead you. You listen to the correction of the Spirit of God.

- Day-to-day it means that I am free to follow Jesus and not myself. I don't need to impress anybody with my righteousness. I don't need to conform to the standards of others. I fix your eyes on Jesus. I follow him wherever he calls me. His righteousness is my righteousness. His strength is my strength. His plan is my path. I can trust that, by his power, I am becoming word and deed, heart and action, what I already am in Christ.

Conclusion:

1. Don't follow blind guides. False paths of righteousness never save. False paths of joy never satisfy. False paths of compromise never bring peace.

- You'll never be pure enough, woke enough, righteous enough, religious enough, conservative enough, or liberal enough.
- Every human system and standard eventually cannibalizes itself because it will become narrower and narrower to the points that no-one makes the cut and all that is left are hypocrites.
 - What idea, person, system are you following that you need to let go of?

2. Follow Jesus your true guide. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the lens through which the story of the Bible and the story of the world makes sense. The beauty of the gospel is that none of us are righteous enough to earn our salvation but all of us are welcomed to participate in the righteousness of Christ. The gospel reminds us that “none are righteous” but “God made him who knew no sin to become sin on our behalf so that we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus is the only path that both calls and enables you to follow him.