

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 15. It was Christmastime in 2022 when we first began our journey through Matthew. I shared that it was my desire to walk through this entire book together. And I also shared that I had no idea how long it might take. Well, it's taken us over 3 years and more than 50 sermons to get half-way through, but I think I am starting to see how we will get to the finish. Lord willing, my plan is for us to make it from Matthew 15 through Matthew 25 this year, bringing us right up to Jesus's death and resurrection. Then, in 2027, we'll aim to complete our time in this book. There's no question in my mind that giving this much attention to Matthew is worth it. Along with Mark, Luke, and John, Matthew gives us a front row seat to observe the life and ministry of our Savior, leading us into deeper faith and worship.

Matthew also does an outstanding job showing us how the whole Bible story centers upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. Which is why I've titled our series in Matthew, "The Promise Fulfilled." Because as we read this book, we see that Matthew is determined to show us that: Every promise of God, every prophetic word, and every part of the Old Testament is *fulfilled* in Jesus. So he quotes the Old Testament over 60 times and alludes to it much more than that. He wants us to see that the story of Jesus is the continuation and culmination of the story that began "In the beginning," when "God created the heavens and the earth." We'll continue to see this theme of fulfillment as we walk through these chapters this year.

Now, the account we're looking at today begins with these words: *Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem...* (Matthew 15:1).

If Matthew were a movie with a soundtrack, there would be some ominous background music at this point. Not only because the Pharisees and the scribes are often the bad guys in the story, but also because this is the first time anyone has come out of Jerusalem to confront Jesus. Until now, Jesus has been carrying out his ministry in the region of Galilee. But for the rest of the book, the emphasis begins to shift toward Jerusalem. And Jesus knows what awaits him there. For example, in Matthew 16:21 we read how *Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised* (Matthew 16:21).

In this second half of Matthew, everything that happens is leading to Jerusalem and the cross, including this interaction with the Pharisees and scribes. As Jesus speaks with them in these verses, and then to the crowds and his disciples, he speaks about what it means to truly honor God, to engage in a life of authentic worship, and what can get in the way. Specifically, he speaks about the danger of human traditions and the depravity of human hearts. If we want to live in a way that is pleasing and glorifying to God, we've got to pay careful attention to what Jesus says here. Because the Pharisees missed this and it ruined them. We do not want to let that be our story. So, first, listen to what Jesus says about...

1. The Danger of Human Traditions

Look at verses 1-2: *Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat"* (Matthew 15:1-2).

Now, why would the Pharisees and scribes travel eighty miles, over multiple days, to ask Jesus why his disciples don't wash their hands before they eat? This might sound like a small thing to us, but it was a big deal in Jesus's day. Because, washing hands had little to do with germs and everything to do with the tradition. Do you see that phrase, "the tradition of the elders"? That's the issue.

In 1st century Israel, there were two major sources of religious commands and instructions that the Jews were careful to follow. First, of course, there was the law of God, summarized in the 10 commandments and expounded in detail throughout the Scriptures. But in addition to God's Word, there was an oral tradition, created by religious leaders, which was added to the law to keep God's people from breaking the law. You can think of the Scriptures as a cliff, and the tradition like a fence.

In college I visited Kenya, and one day we stood on this huge cliff overlooking a national park. As we took in the view, there were workers constructing a fence on the cliff's edge. We asked them why they were installing the fence (it was kind of wrecking the view). And they told us, "Because somebody fell off." Well, that makes sense. The fence is meant to keep you from danger. And this was the purpose of the tradition. For example, in the Old Testament there are laws about how *the priests* were to cleanse themselves (including their hands) before they carried out their duties in the tabernacle or temple. But there were no such laws for *the everyday person*. So, just to be safe, the religious leaders created some detailed instructions for how every Israelite should wash their hands. And these regulations were incorporated into "the tradition," like a fence to keep anyone from breaking the law.

Now, there's nothing wrong with putting up a fence. In fact, it's good to think practically about ways to avoid breaking God's commands. The goal of a holy life is not to see how close we can get to sin without falling! But here was the issue in the 1st century—and it continues to be an issue today: the Pharisees and the scribes began to believe that their traditions held the same authority as God's commands. And this caused them to bind people's consciences with things God himself did not require. It also fostered spiritual pride as they often looked down on others who were not as disciplined as them (like Jesus's disciples). And in some instances, their commitment to these traditions even surpassed their commitment to God's Word. And that's what Jesus chooses to address here, which is why he responds to their question the way he does. They asked him, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?"

Then look at verse 3: *He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"* (Matthew 15:3). That's not the answer they were expecting. They must have been shocked, confused even. What do you mean we break God's commands for the sake of our tradition? Well, Jesus gives them an example. Verse 4: *For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die'* (Matthew 15:4).

Here are two commandments, pulled directly from the Bible. The Pharisees and scribes knew them well. *But*, Jesus continues in verses 5-6: *But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honor his father.'*

So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God (Matthew 15:5-6).

One of the ways you can honor your father and mother as they get older is by providing financial support for their needs. Many of you are doing this for your parents with joyful generosity. You are taking care of medical bills, home improvement costs, etc. That's a good thing. But Jesus knows that some of the Pharisees and scribes are avoiding this act of service in the name of a higher cause. They had a tradition that said if you dedicated some of your money to the Lord's work, to the maintenance and upkeep of the temple, you could not use that money for anything else. So, you can imagine the following scenario.

A certain Pharisee doesn't care for his parents, he doesn't want to support his parents, so he devises a plan. He makes a vow to give his savings to the temple. Then, when his parents come to him with a need, he tells them, "Oh mom and dad, I'd love to help, but I can't... what you would have gained from me is given to God." It sounds so holy... so heavenly minded... but Jesus has a different word for it. He calls it hypocrisy. Look at verses 7-9: *You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men"* (Matthew 15:7-9).

If you say, "I'm honoring God," while breaking God's commands, that's hypocrisy. It happened in Isaiah's day. It happened in Jesus's day. Therefore, we should ask ourselves, where does it happen in our day? Are there situations in which we might find ourselves saying, "I'm honoring God," when we are actually breaking his commands? Are we prone, in any way, to this kind of hypocrisy? It's not an easy question to answer, because it's not easy to see. This was clearly a blind spot for the Pharisees, and it can be a blind spot for us too. This is why it's important ask God to open our eyes, to pray like David prays in Psalm 139:23-24, when he says, *Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me* (Psalm 139:23-24).

If we humble ourselves, and pray like that, what might we see? In one sense that's a very personal question. And I'd encourage you to pray that prayer, asking God to help you see if any human traditions are causing you to walk contrary to his commands. But at the same time, if we consider our context, I'm sure we can name some human traditions, some common customs that may begin with a noble purpose (like giving money to the temple) but end up leading us away from God's instruction (like honoring our father and mother). Let me give you one example.

As Christians, we want to stand for the truth. We believe God has spoken. That he has shown us what is good, right, beautiful, and holy. And we see the truth under attack today in many ways. So, it is a noble cause to defend what God has revealed in his Word. However, it is human tradition today, a common custom, to try and win arguments by destroying opponents. To demonize and slander. To mock, belittle, revile, and sometimes, even harm. That's happening all the time. And it will be tempting for us to act in the same way. But if we do, in the name of standing for the truth, we will find ourselves disregarding God's commands. Commands like those found in Romans 12, where we read this:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... Never be wise in your own sight... Repay no one evil for evil... If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God (Romans 12:14-19).

That's just one example, but here's the application: If we want to avoid the kind of hypocrisy that ruined the Pharisees, we need to watch out for this danger of human traditions, always letting God's commands have the ultimate authority and the final say in every area of our lives. Next, I want you to see what Jesus has to say about...

2. The Depravity of Human Hearts

Jesus hasn't answered the Pharisees question. They asked him why his disciples break the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands. And he had a few things to say about the tradition of the elders. But now he comes back to hand washing. Why does he allow his disciples to break this tradition? Why is this non-essential in Jesus's mind?

Look at verses 10-11: *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" (Matthew 15:10-11).*

It's hard for us to comprehend how shocking this must have been to hear. As we'll see in a moment, even Jesus's own disciples can't understand what he's saying. Because the law of God contained clear instructions regarding several kinds of food that God's people were not to eat lest they become defiled! But Jesus says, "Neither unclean hands nor unclean food defiles a person." So, having questioned the religious leaders' human traditions, is Jesus now contradicting the Scriptures themselves? The Pharisees sure think so!

Look at verse 12: *Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" (Matthew 15:12).*

"Uh, Jesus? Just a heads up... That conversation with the Pharisees didn't go so well... They were pretty upset about that thing you said about eating..." But Jesus isn't concerned. Look at verses 13-14: *He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15:13-14).*

As we keep working our way through Matthew, it will become increasingly clear that the Pharisees have lost their way. They may have set out to live in a way that honored God. But now, tragically, they are beginning to set themselves against God's Son. They are not God's faithful servants. In fact, they are more like weeds in the field of God's kingdom, soon to be rooted up. They are like blind guides, walking headfirst into a pit, and no one should follow them.

Friends, don't ever follow anyone who sets themselves against Jesus, no matter how respected they may be—and the Pharisees were certainly respected in their day—they will lead you into destruction. But the question is still hanging in the air. Why did Jesus say that food cannot make

someone unclean, when the Scriptures say it can? So, Peter speaks up. *But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us" (Matthew 15:15).*

Again, for a 1st century Israelite, the thought that food doesn't defile made no sense. "What do you mean?" Peter asks. Now, look at verses 16-18: *And he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person (Matthew 15:16-18).*

The issue, Jesus is saying, has never been food. The issue is always the heart. God had his reasons for prohibiting certain foods under the Old Covenant. But Jesus is saying, under the New Covenant these prohibitions are removed. Yet the core issue remains the same: the state of the human heart. Because man looks at the outward appearance of things, but God looks at the heart. And when he examines the human heart, what does he find? Well, it's not good.

Look at verses 19-20. Jesus says, *For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone" (Matthew 15:19-20).* Jesus is saying, everything that defiles us, everything that makes us impure in God's sight, flows out of our own hearts. Now, that flies directly in the face of one of the predominant messages in our world today. Many people believe that humans are born in a state of neutrality, only to be corrupted by the evils of society. And this is why so many people are trying so hard to fix society! Because by doing so, they believe they can save humanity. But that is a recipe for perpetual frustration. Because society is not the ultimate problem—we are.

In 1905, G.K. Chesterton put it perfectly when he wrote to a newspaper to discuss what was wrong with the world in his day. He said, "The answer to the question, 'What is Wrong,' is, or should be, 'I am wrong.'" Friends, the Bible teaches that since the first human beings fell into sin, we are all born into this world with a disease deep within our hearts. Jeremiah 17:9 says, *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.* And it's this sickness that goes on to corrupt the world. As Jesus says here, out of the heart flows all kinds of evil. Therefore, our greatest need, our most foundational need, more foundational than our need to solve the major social, political, and economic dilemmas of our day, our greatest need is the healing of human hearts.

So where does the healing come from? Well, it comes from the very one who is exposing the issue here in Matthew 15. Like a good doctor, Jesus—the great physician—not only diagnoses the disease, he provides the cure! He came into this world to cleanse all the sin that has defiled us and to put new hearts within us. He is the fulfillment of the promise God made in Ezekiel 36:25-27. Look at these verses one at a time.

First, verse 25. God says, *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you (Ezekiel 36:25).* Jesus came to cleanse our hearts, to wash away our sins, by shedding his blood as an all-sufficient sacrifice—paying the penalty we deserved so that we might become pure.

Then, in verse 26, God says, *And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh* (Ezekiel 36:26). Jesus came that we might walk in newness of life, born again with new hearts, full of new power and new possibilities. Hearts filled and guided by the Holy Spirit, truly living to the glory of God!

Look at verse 27: *And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules* (Ezekiel 36:27). You see, the Christian life is not a life free from rules. It's a life of joyful obedience to God's rules, obedience that flows from the heart. The Pharisees missed this! They thought their strict observance, and the law, and the tradition secured their status before God. But they ignored the heart, and this ruined them!

And so many people miss this today! They focus so much on externals, when above all, it is the state of the heart that matters most. So, let me ask you, what is the state of your heart today? Do you see sickness and the need for healing? Do you see the defilement and the need for cleansing? Come to Jesus, approach the great physician, and ask him to heal you and cleanse you. He will surely do it!

Conclusion

Here's how I'd like to close our time today. We've seen the danger of human traditions. And perhaps we've seen some way we've succumbed to this danger ourselves, disregarding God's commands and walking in hypocrisy. Or perhaps we've listened to Jesus's reminder that *out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person*. And we realize, yes, there's something on that list that has defiled me, even this week. Well, let's embrace our glorious hope today, that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sins. Let's confess our sins and rest in his grace.

Would you pray with me? I want to invite you to make these first 12 verses of Psalm 51 your prayer today:

Psalm 51:1–2, 10–12

- [1] Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- [2] Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

- [10] Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
- [11] Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- [12] Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.