

Matthew 15:1-20 Sermon Outline

Introduction

Imagine a church that loves Easter! Love it so much, they begin a special practice to heighten the celebration and nature of those services. The practice they begin is this. Everyone who comes to church on Good Friday, when they focus upon the death of Christ on the cross, must wear black. It doesn't matter *what* you wear (within reason!), but it has to be black. Black dress, black slacks, black shirt black tie, black jeans – but it has to be black. On Easter Sunday, when they celebrate the resurrection of Christ, everyone in turn has to wear white. Again it doesn't matter what they wear, as long as it is primarily white, to celebrate the triumph of Jesus Christ over the grave.

What do you think? Good idea? In this particular church, on one particular Easter Sunday morning, one of the regular members enters the sanctuary. They know the practice of the church, that everyone should wear white, but they come into church as a family dressed in all kinds of different colours. The mom is in red, the father in blue, children in beige and yellow and green! As they walk into the back of the church one of the elders runs to catch by the arm. Speaking to the father he says this, "Why are you sinning against the elders by breaking our tradition?"

What do you think?

In the famous musical *Fiddler on the Roof* the main character, Tevye, explains to his children why they do things the way they do. He says this:

Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years...we have traditions for everything: how to sleep, how to eat... how to work... how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered, and always wear a little prayer shawl that shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, "How did this tradition get started?" I'll tell you!

[pause]

I don't know. But it's a tradition... and because of our traditions... Every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.

What do you think? Do our traditions tell us who we are, and what God expects us to do?

Something of the issue set before Jesus in the text we focus on this morning. The disciples did not follow the tradition of the elders; have they sinned? Do they fail to understand what it really means to be pure and clean when you worship God?

When do our traditions help us in serving God, and when do they hurt us? When do they remind us of what God expects of us, and when do they simply remind us of what others expect of us? When should we keep them? When should we break them?

In addressing this, we will see that Jesus instructs us about true worship and purity in the eyes of God, and we will see that our traditions must always bow the knee to what Jesus defines as true worship, and true purity.

1. When traditions are wrong

Two situations outlined in our text for when traditions are wrong. The first is this: when tradition violates (or contradicts) the word of God.

This is the focus in v. 3-9 (although v. 7-9 will apply elsewhere as well).

In verse 3 Jesus counterattacks against the Pharisees. He will get back to their question and He will answer that question – v. 10-20 – but for now He launches a challenge to them to expose the error and sin of their ways, of their exalting of their traditions over the commands of God.

He points to a practice, approved by the tradition of the elders, that contradicts the clear meaning of God's commands. The practice spoken of by Jesus is a practice of dedication. Mark 7 explains it with a little more clarity than Matthew 15 (Mark, writing to Gentiles, gives more background). Mark 7:10-13.

Jesus is speaking in the realm of relations between a child and his or her parents, and he is speaking about something very important – the idea that the commandment **to honour our father and mother** does not only apply to us when we are children living under the roof of our parents. It also applies to us when our parents, perhaps due to age, need help from us and, specifically, may need help that costs us something. Our money perhaps, or our time or part of our property to care for them.

Should that happen to us as children, God's word requires us to care for our parents. God's word requires us to help them in their need because we treasure them and love them in Christ.

Now, under the tradition of the elders and Pharisees there was a loop hole to get out of this obligation. The children could declare that any financial help they might give their elderly parents, or any gift of time, instead of being given to their parents, would be given to God. It would be Corban.

So, mom, dad, I know you need extra money to put some food on the table and I had some until Sunday – when I gave a little extra to God this week in the offering plate. SO I can't take care of you because what I would have used to care for you has been, unfortunately, given to God.

With the Pharisees it was actually something worse than that. The idea of declaring something dedicated to God allowed you to keep using it for personal benefit, but meant only that it couldn't be given to anyone else. So the child who did this wouldn't actually go without themselves – it would just be their parents who suffered.

Now recognize what Jesus is saying here. Jesus tells us in Luke 14:26 that if anyone comes to him and does not hate father and mother we aren't worthy to be His disciples. But this, clearly, is never intended to say we fail to care for our parents. Never. The idea is always that we love Christ more. Commitment to Christ does not excuse us from caring for our family. We can't claim our

dedication to God as a reason we don't show care or honour to our parents. Sorry mom, dad, I just don't have time to come and help because I'm so busy with church!

The reason for this is because human tradition, or human ideas, that contradict what God commands are *never* right. Any tradition then which may even use the cloak of piety or holiness as a reason for ignoring or contradicting what God commands us in His word *cannot* be held to. It must be repented of, it must be removed.

But there is a second type of tradition that is similarly wrong, and must be repented of.

Secondly, tradition is wrong if it violates God's word, but tradition is also wrong when it becomes the new standard of true worship/dedication.

It is wrong when it violates God's word, but it wasn't just the Pharisees law about dedicating things to God that Jesus was upset about. He was also upset about this imposed standard that the disciples had to keep – that they somehow were transgressing because they did not keep the tradition of the elders in washing their hands.

Jesus will address that specifically in verses 10-11 and in vv. 16-20, but already in verse 3 that is what sparks His response. He is not upset merely when tradition goes against God's word, but He is upset also when tradition creates a new, man-made standard of what sincere or genuine Christianity looks like.

You see, the question of the Pharisees should upset us, not only because of what they DID complain about, but because of what they DIDN'T complain about.

You see the Pharisees didn't come to Jesus because they were concerned that His disciples were no longer practicing godly charity. They didn't come complaining that the disciples were thieves or abusing the poor. They didn't come saying that the disciples were arrogant, or quick to anger, or liars, or sinners against God's law and God's word. Those things, beloved, would be worth raising concerns.

To the contrary they came because they had a tradition in their religion. A custom that had been in place for many years, and the disciples weren't following it.

This is an exceptionally dangerous thing. We begin to judge others, and look at other's faithfulness to God, and love for God, not based on the fruit of the Spirit but based on some *other* standard that we ourselves have created.

That is why Jesus condemns them with the words of Isaiah 29, saying in v. 8-9 **These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me, and in vain they worship Me teaching as doctrines the commands of men.**

They have re-made God's laws. They have created a new standard – and here too we must be careful. Our extra-Biblical traditions can never become the standard of true purity – and when they do our tradition or view of that tradition has become sinful. We are teaching our ideas as God's commands.

2. Why un-Biblical or extra-Biblical traditions held wrongly are a great danger in the church.

And that is really the danger of what this teaching leads TO. We may ask, why is this so important? A: Because when we begin to allow traditions that are either AGAINST Scripture or ADDED to Scripture then we begin to misunderstand and twist what true worship and true cleanliness is really all about.

Hear and understand. Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.

Peter asks for explanation in verse 15 and Jesus gives it. **Read v.16-20** Point: The Pharisees, with their rules, with their false standards, are distorting what the real issue of coming before God is all about. Its about purity of the heart. And when the emphasis is put on the externals, whether its washing your hands in a ceremonial way before a meal, or what clothes you're wearing, or about whether there is a screen in the service or a guitar providing musical accompaniment – when those become the issue you are simply missing the point. The point is not that the instrument playing music will make you unclean – the uncleanness comes from YOU. **Out of the HEART proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.**

From the HEART. Sometimes we think that purity is all about what we keep ourselves from. If we have enough external guards we'll be kept clean. Enough guards on the internet, enough guards on where we go for vacations, enough guards on how we spend our money or use our free time, or a hundred other things then that will make us clean.

But the problem isn't on keeping things OUT. The problem is about what is already IN there. And what we need is not some man made tradition to make us feel right with a holy God – we need a Saviour who can change our stubborn hearts.

And the truth is that wherever man made rules begin to come to the foreground of the church, the glory and beauty and power of the Gospel IS LOST.

Why does the church sometimes lose the joy of following and belonging to Christ? Of being His? It can be from many things – outright sin, outright rebellion. But it often comes in a more nuanced and destructive way – just a slight change of focus to start making the things of God less important than the externals demands and desires that come from the sinful heart of man.

You want to kill a church just begin to have a list of written or unwritten rules and expectations of what it *really* means to be a member of the church beyond repentance, faith, and a life committed to the glory of God according to His word and you'll do it. Add unwritten rules like it means you can't have ever fallen into a really bad sin – like abortion or struggles with same-sex attractions – you'll kill the church. Add unwritten rules like it means you're kids sit in the service like little angels or you'll get sidelong glances from everyone around you – and you'll kill the church. Why?

Because it misses redefines the true nature of sin, because it takes away from the key of what we need before God – a new heart – and makes it about what we need before man – conformity to code. And when we misunderstand the true nature of sin beloved we lose the true nature of grace.

For this reason Jesus gives a STRIKING condemnation of the Pharisees. The disciples come to Him in verse 12 and say **Do You know the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying? And Jesus responds, “Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Leave them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind, and if the blind leads the blind both will fall into a ditch.**

Jesus says in essence: Their teaching is NOT the teaching of God and it will NOT remain. So stay away from them – if you listen to their teaching you will be like a blind man following a blind man and you'll both step out into traffic.

This is an exceptionally important principle. The Pharisees were important people. They held esteem in the Jewish community – verse one told us they were from the capital of Israel itself, Jerusalem. Yet Christ opposed their shift in focus so vehemently that they were offended, and when the disciples showed concern about that offence Jesus warned them to stay away from those Pharisees lest the blind lead the blind to destruction.

When people set up man-made standards of 'holiness' in the Christian community against or beyond God's word it is NOT the time for timidity. When people begin to exalt themselves as Christians and judge others as Christians on the basis of man-made standards, we should not be silent. Because it endangers the one teaching of being **uprooted, and** because it endangers others they may teach of being **led by the blind**, they must be challenged and, if hard of heart, they must be **left alone**. Removed from a place where they influence God's children.

The Gospel is that important. Remembering what TRUE sin is, and what true repentance and forgiveness is, remembering that we needed a Saviour who would provide a true ATONEMENT for sin and not just a Saviour who would show us how to get in with the cool crowd is THAT important.

Because when it comes to living our lives for God, God calls us to a life of living from the heart according to HIS word. And that drives us to Christ for nothing less than a cleansing of soul, and that is precisely what our Lord gives. When we stay focused on that, and aware of our real sin, and of God's real grace, the church naturally begins to be a place which focuses and grows in the fruit of the Spirit being built up on Christ, the chief cornerstone. He is continually exalted, and His bride is continually beautified as iron sharpens iron, as God receives the glory, and as we learn to worship Him in Spirit and in truth.

3. Application

Now how does this apply to us? How does it affect *our* worship, or *our* views about the Gospel, and about others in the church of Jesus Christ?

The truth is we *all* have traditions that we hold to and that, whether we admit it or not, we tend to use as a standard of whether other people are really good or really genuine Christians.

Story of a newly married man and his father-in-law.