

THE COMMAND OF GOD AND THE TRADITIONS OF MEN

Matthew 15:1-20

Key Verse: 15:3

“Jesus answered, ‘And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?’”

In this passage Jesus confronts the Jewish religious leaders. They accused Jesus’ disciples of breaking the tradition of the elders. But Jesus pointed out that they were doing something much worse: they were breaking the command of God. Jesus further instructed that pleasing God is not a matter of ceremony, but of the heart. When we accept and understand Jesus’ teaching, we are ready to receive his grace. Otherwise we, too, can be ceremonial, hypocritical, and miserable. May God bless us to accept Jesus’ words in this passage.

First, the command of God is absolute; traditions change (1-6).

Look at verses 1-2. “Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!’” Jesus and his disciples were in Galilee at a place called Gennesaret (14:34). A delegation of Pharisees and teachers of the law came all the way from Jerusalem to see them. It was an official visit. They must have been wearing priestly garments and carrying official documents signed by the high priest, and notarized by the temple clerk. Taking an imposing stance, they spoke with deep voices to resonate the authority of Judaism. Then they charged Jesus’ disciples with breaking the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before they ate.

This might seem rather funny to us. But to the religious leaders, it was very serious. The washing they refer to was not for the sake of hygiene. It was a ceremonial washing. In the Old Testament, there were many things that God regarded as unclean. Anyone who touched them became unclean. These included dead bodies, people with diseases, unclean animals, and so on. Anyone who was ceremonially unclean could not join in public worship. The Pharisees developed rules for ceremonial cleansing as part of their oral tradition. In 200 A.D. these rules were written down in the Mishnah. In brief, the Jewish leaders wanted to force Jesus and his disciples to follow these traditions.

How did Jesus answer? Look at verse 3. “Jesus replied, ‘And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?’” Jesus rebuked the Pharisees sharply. Their problem was that they did not honor the command of God, though they were stringent in their observance of tradition. We must know the difference between the command of God and the traditions of men.

The command of God refers to the essential spiritual truths that God has given in the Bible. These truths originated in the heart of God and have been commanded explicitly by God. They carry the weight of his divine authority as the Almighty Creator and Redeemer of his people. Central among them are the Ten Commandments, which Jesus refers to in this passage repeatedly. When God gave these commandments he did his best to impress upon the people of Israel the seriousness of obeying them. When God met with Moses on Mt. Sinai, there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast (Ex 19:16). Fire and smoke billowed from the mountain and the whole mountain trembled violently. When the people saw this, they also trembled, with the fear of God. Against that background, God spoke, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex 20:2). Then God gave his people the Ten Commandments as the core of their covenant with him. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stated that he came to fulfill the Law. Jesus upheld the Ten Commandments. In fact, Jesus further developed them by pointing out their spiritual meaning. For example, anger is tantamount to murder, and lustful thoughts are tantamount to adultery (Mt 5:21-22; 5:27-28). Later, Jesus summarized the Law by saying, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Mt 22:37-40).

The commands of God are very different in essence than the traditions of men. The commands of God are absolute. The commands of God are eternal and universal. They must always be obeyed with an absolute attitude toward God. But the traditions of men originate with men. They may be good applications of God’s commands, but they are subject to error. They need to be revised over time or changed to accommodate culture. For example, consider pipe organs in Christian worship service. There were no pipe organs in Christian churches before the Middle Ages. It was because they had been used in the Roman Colosseum during the persecution of Christians. Out of respect for the martyrs their use was prohibited. But in the Middle Ages, with the development of sacred music by many classical

composers, they began to be used extensively in churches. By the 20th century, it seemed that pipe organs were essential to Christian worship. When we took over this church building there was a pipe organ here. But we destroyed it and threw it away to make a better environment for young people to worship. To use a pipe organ or not is a flexible matter. Likewise for drums. We must be flexible with such things. But we must be absolute with the commands of God.

The Pharisees were just the opposite. They were flexible with the commands of God, but absolute about the traditions of men. To help them realize their problem, Jesus gave them a concrete example. Look at verses 4-6. "For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition."

"Honor your father and mother" is one of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:12). It is God's everlasting and unchanging truth that children must honor their parents. God promises long life to those who do. At the same time, God pronounces a death penalty on those who curse their parents. It is right for children to obey their parents and learn from them. Then they can grow in the knowledge of God and build up their character and conscience. When children become adults, they should remember how much their parents suffered for them. Though their elderly parents may seem helpless, their children must treat them with great respect, even providing for all their needs. Mother Barry showed us a good example. When her mother, Grandma Agnes, was elderly, Mother Barry brought her to Chicago to live with her. In the midst of her busy life of serving God, Mother Barry cared for Grandma Agnes with great respect. Dr. Samuel Lee is also an excellent example to us. No one worked harder than he did in serving the work of God. Yet he was exemplary in loving his wife and caring for his children. As a result, they all became fruitful servants of gospel ministry.

However, the Pharisees in this passage taught people how to avoid honoring their parents. They developed a means of dedicating one's estate to God, which the gospel writer Mark calls "Corban." Basically they pledged their estate to God, effective at the time of their death. They could enjoy it during their lifetimes, and at death it passed into the Temple treasury. In this way, they could tell their parents that they had nothing to give because everything they had was devoted to God. When their parents asked for help, they said, "Mom, Dad: I have devoted my estate to God. I cannot help you. It would be a sin for me to help you. Sorry." They avoided honoring their parents in the name of serving God. Jesus said it was sin; it was breaking God's command.

We must think about this deeply. Many young people in our community have received overflowing blessing through their parents. They should honor their parents as God commands. They should think and pray deeply about the spiritual inheritance they have received and its meaning to their lives. But under the influence of modern culture some do not honor their parents. They do not obey their parents. They do not respect their parents. They do not listen to their parents. They have become like a rock star who sang, "I don't care what you say anymore, this is my life. Go ahead with your own life, leave me alone." Some even deceive their parents by telling them, "I am going to a church meeting." But what they really do is go somewhere else.

On the other hand, parents must also accept their responsibility for their children. Parents must set a godly example for their children. Parents must educate their children in every way. However, some parents expect the church to raise their children. They neglect their parental duties, saying that they are serving God wholeheartedly. Yet they have time to watch television and to surf the internet. Here we must realize that neither parents nor children can use their church activity as an excuse for not honoring their family relationships and duties.

Several years ago, Lee Iacocca gained national recognition for turning Chrysler Corporation from a losing business to a success. He did so through a relentless work ethic. He achieved his goal, but many of his employee's families were irreparably damaged. He compared it to winning a war at the cost of an only son (See "Spiritual Leadership" by Henry Blackaby). It was not worth it. God established the family as the basic unit of society. God wants the family to develop according to his Biblical truths to be fruit-bearing and honoring to him. Our family relationships and responsibilities are God-given. We must build up our families for the glory of God. At the same time, we cannot avoid our duty to God with the excuse of family responsibility. We must love God and love our family members.

In verses 4-6, Jesus dealt with a specific command of God to give a concrete example. Yet the general truth that Jesus teaches applies on a broader scope. All of the Ten Commandments are the absolutes of God and must be honored above tradition, human reason and all manner of human teachings. In light of this passage it is essential to discern between modern culture and the Ten Commandments. There are things that are legal in our nation and culture which are a violation of the Ten Commandments. For example, it is a legal right in many modern societies to abort an unborn baby. Being legal does not make it right. It is virtual murder in the sight of God. Again, it is legal to divorce with no fault in Illinois. Even adulterers can divorce their spouses and walk away without any fault assigned to them. However, adultery is always a grave sin before God. There is a lot of tolerance in modern culture for homosexual behavior. This also violates the law of God. In this environment we may feel very strange to uphold the Ten Commandments. Still, we must do so.

We are greatly encouraged by Judge Roy Moore. As a state circuit court judge in Alabama, he displayed the Ten Commandments in his courtroom, despite much opposition. Later, as Chief Justice of the Alabama State Supreme Court, he placed a 2.6 ton monument with the Ten Commandments in the state judicial building. When he refused a Federal Judge's order to remove it, he was removed. Nevertheless, he challenged America to return to the Ten Commandments as the foundation of law. This year he campaigned for governor of Alabama and was narrowly defeated. We hope he may win next time. May God help us to honor the commands of God in our personal lives and our nation.

Second, God wants our hearts (10-20).

When the religious leaders of Jesus' day did not honor the commands of God above the traditions of men, they became hypocrites. Jesus rebuked them further. Look at verses 7-9. "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'" True worship must come from the heart and it must be based on the truth in the Bible.

Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "God is spirit and his worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:24). Here, "in spirit" means from our hearts, and "in truth" means according to the word of God. Therefore, to worship God we must acknowledge the word of God as the word of God. We must repent of our sins from our hearts and ask God's forgiveness and cleansing. Then God gives us his Holy Spirit. The Spirit enable us to worship him from our hearts. This worship pleases God and gives life to our souls. But hypocrites worship in vain. They put on a good show, but do not connect with God through the Spirit. They leave the worship service in the same dry state in which they came. Their main problem is that they do not honor the word of God as the word of God.

Jesus was broken-hearted over the hardness of the religious leaders. With a shepherd's heart, he appealed to the crowd directly. Look at verses 10-11. "Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him "unclean," but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him "unclean."'" Jesus pronounced the tradition of the elders and the practice of ceremonial law as secondary, and virtually tossed it aside. Jesus really wanted people of his time to break free from the hypocrisy of empty ceremony and to have a vibrant relationship with God. But when the Pharisees heard this, they only felt that Jesus was taking people away from them. They became very upset. The disciples were somewhat sensitive to the Pharisees, and they reported this to Jesus. Jesus told them plainly, "Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit" (14).

Peter realized the great importance of Jesus' teaching. He realized he had better understand it well. So he asked Jesus to explain it. Look at verses 16-20. "'Are you still so dull?' Jesus asked them. 'Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man "unclean." For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man "unclean"; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him "unclean."'"

In brief, God sees the heart. And he measures the thoughts of our hearts in light of the Ten Commandments. These thoughts are exposed by the words we speak. Thus, it is our words that expose the sinful state of our hearts before God. When the Pharisees spoke critical words toward Jesus and his disciples, they revealed the evilness of their hearts. They were jealous of Jesus and eager to hold on to their human honor and power as religious leaders. Their

hearts were sick. No ritual ceremony or outward activity can cleanse a sinsick heart. When we consider the human heart and the Law of God, the only conclusion is that we are all sinners who are sick to the very core of our being and without any remedy for cleansing.

Third, God cleanses our hearts through Jesus Christ.

However, what we could not do for ourselves, God did for us. God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ as a ransom sacrifice for our sins. Jesus establishes a new covenant with his people. This was foretold in Jeremiah 31:33-34, which says, “‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the Lord. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’”

Romans 8:3-4 says, “For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” God sent Jesus as our Savior. When we accept Jesus’ death and resurrection God forgives our sins, cleanses our hearts, and puts his Holy Spirit in us. The Holy Spirit changes our inner being day by day. The Holy Spirit produces the fruit of love, joy, and peace in our hearts. The Holy Spirit changes us from the inside out and enables us to live a truly holy life that pleases God and blesses others. He enables us to put on a new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24). Then we can serve God all our days. Finally we will enter the kingdom of heaven to live forever with the Lord in perfect holiness and righteousness.

In this passage we learn that we must honor the word of God above the traditions of men. Especially, we must honor the Ten Commandments, which are the pillars of God’s law. We also learn that God wants our hearts to be right with him. This is possible when Jesus dwells in our hearts and pours his Holy Spirit into our hearts. May God bless us all with a clean heart by faith in Christ.