

# THE WORD OF GOD AND TRADITION

Matthew 15:1-28

Key Verse: 15:6

**“...they are not to honor their father or mother with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.”**

This month marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation led by Martin Luther. It was on October 31, 1517 that Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg. He exposed the corruption and false doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, which was based on tradition. In this way he preserved the gospel truth, based on the word of God. This was the spark that grew into flames and spread all over Europe. For doing this, Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X in 1521. An assembly of the most powerful political and religious authorities demanded that he recant for his writings. In that threatening situation, he testified, *“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason, I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.”* He was condemned. On the way home, he was kidnapped by some masked horsemen. They were sent by Frederick of Saxony, who hid him in Wartburg Castle, where he translated the Bible into German. At that time, the Scriptures were written in Latin. Only clergymen were permitted to read the Scriptures. Through Luther’s translation, ordinary Germans could read and understand the Scriptures in their own language. They experienced the power of God and his grace. Since then, the Scriptures have been accessible to everyone, not just special people. A main principle of the Reformation is *Sola Scriptura*, (*Scripture alone*). This asserts that Scripture, as the divinely inspired word of God, must govern all church traditions, creeds, and teachings. The church constantly needs to be reformed by the words of God. This is what Martin Luther did, and we respect him. However, reformation did not originate with Luther; it came from Jesus, as we see today. Jesus emphasized that people must honor God and his word more than human traditions. We see a good example in the Canaanite woman. Let’s learn what Jesus wants from us.

**First, what really defiles a person (1-20).** According to 14:34-36, Jesus had been in Gennesaret, in northwestern Galilee, healing many sick people. While

# THE WORD OF GOD AND TRADITION

he was there, some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to him from Jerusalem (1). These religious dignitaries usually avoided Galilee or Gentile areas. But they made this long journey to confront and accuse Jesus. They asked, **“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”** (2) Their tradition originated after the Babylonian exile. Jewish rabbis wanted to help Jewish people have a clear identity as God’s people amidst idolatrous influences. So, they interpreted and applied the law of Moses to make meticulous rules and regulations, which became their tradition. As time passed by, the traditions became more important than the word of God. Anyone who broke the traditions of the elders could be condemned. When the religious leaders accused Jesus and his disciples in this way, it was a serious matter.

Was Jesus intimidated? Not at all! Rather, Jesus took the offensive. He replied, **“And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?”** (3) Then Jesus cited the fifth commandment from Exodus 20:12, **“Honor your father and mother,”** as well as Exodus 21:17, **“Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.”** This is the command of God which must be kept. However, these clear commands were burdensome to the religious leaders. For example, they did not want to support their aged parents financially. So, they made a rule that if anyone declared, **“this money is devoted to God,”** they could avoid using it for their parents. In truth, they just wanted to keep it for themselves. With a man-made rule, they justified breaking the command of God. Jesus said, **“Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition”** (6b). It is very easy for us to do this as well. Dr. Samuel Lee’s last word was, “Go back to the Bible.” We need to continually evaluate our beliefs and practices before the word of God. As we do, we should reform ourselves and our community accordingly.

In verses 7-9, Jesus points out their real problem: **“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 merely human rules.’”** The word “hypocrite” means “an actor under an assumed character.” For example, a famous comedian played a wonderful father in a television series. So, people thought he was like that in his personal life. But in reality, he used the power of celebrity to deceive and abuse many women. Likewise, the religious leaders

# THE WORD OF GOD AND TRADITION

said many wonderful words to honor God and appeared to be holy. But in their hearts, they did not honor God at all. Rather, they were filled with greed and lust. To such people, St. Paul said, **“You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?”** (Ro 2:21b-22a) God does not see just what is outside; he looks at the heart (1Sa 16:7). We must examine our hearts based on the word of God. David prayed, **“May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight...”** (Ps 19:14). We can deceive others. But we cannot deceive God. Let’s ask ourselves, “Am I honoring God from my heart?”

After rebuking the religious leaders, Jesus turned toward the crowd. He said, **“Listen and understand. What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them”** (10-11). Jesus wanted to protect the crowd from the bad influence of hypocrisy and legalism. Jesus boldly challenged the religious leaders’ establishment power. It was dangerous, and the disciples were scared. They came to him and asked, **“Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”** (12) The disciples thought that Jesus was not aware of this because he did not look scared at all. Jesus replied, **“Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit”** (13-14). The religious leaders looked so strong, and it seemed their power would last forever. But from God’s point of view, they were like weeds that would soon be pulled up by the roots. This is true of all man-made ideas and human organizations. They will all self-destruct and disappear. Only God, his word, and what he establishes will remain forever. In essence, this is the kingdom of heaven. Here, Jesus taught his disciples to have spiritual insight to see through religious and cultural systems so that we may not be intimidated by them. A few years ago, I visited Istanbul, Turkey and toured two famous buildings: the church of St. Sophia and the Blue Mosque. The church looked like an ancient museum and they charged a fee to enter. The mosque was full of people actively engaged in worship and admittance was free. This was done intentionally to support the Muslim narrative that Islam replaces Christianity. Seeing this made my heart very heavy. At that moment, the Holy Spirit inspired me that what is not rooted in God’s truth cannot last. I was reminded of the fall of Communism. Though it seemed to swallow the world for 70 years, it has disappeared since it was not based on God’s truth.

# THE WORD OF GOD AND TRADITION

This assured me that Islam will also collapse in due time. Let's see through manmade systems and stand firm in the gospel truth.

Jesus' courageous words liberated Peter from fear. Peter felt free to ask, **"Explain the parable to us"** (15). Peter might have expected to hear, "Good question, Peter!" Instead, Jesus said, **"Are you still so dull?"** (16) In raising them as leaders, Jesus was sometimes sharp and challenging. He wanted them to be alert, engaged, and aware. Jesus wanted Peter to really think about the meaning of his teachings. Then, based on human metabolism, Jesus explained the point he wanted them to understand. Whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body (17). Such things cannot defile a person. But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and that is what defiles them (18). For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander (19). These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them (20).

Here, the word "heart" is emphasized. This is the central or innermost part of a human being. The most serious consequence of Adam's fall was the utter corruption or defilement of the human heart. In Genesis 6:5, the Lord saw that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. David confessed in Psalm 51:5, **"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."** When we see babies, they look very cute. But the first words out of their mouths are often, "No!" or "Mine!" It shows us that they are naturally rebellious, selfish and greedy. Jeremiah 17:9 says, **"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"** With sin staining our hearts, the very core of our being, how can we ever be clean? We cannot be clean through religious activities, doing good deeds, or psychotherapy. For us to be clean, our hearts must be cleansed. We cannot buy heart cleansing medicine with money. How can our hearts be cleansed? Only by the blood of Jesus. 1 John 1:7b says, **"the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."** Hebrews 9:14 says, **"the blood of Christ...[will] cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God!"**

Apostle Peter probably did not understand the deep meaning of Jesus' teaching at the time. But later, after Jesus died and rose again, the Holy Spirit inspired him to realize that the human heart can be transformed by the gospel

# THE WORD OF GOD AND TRADITION

truth. When a heart is transformed, all kinds of sinful desires disappear and the genuine love of God fills one's heart. In 1 Peter 1:22-23, Peter said, **“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”** When sinful desires fill our hearts, we are not happy. Even though we dress up and speak well, what we do is evil. We are filled with anxiety, fear, sorrow, hatred, envy, guilt, shame. But when our hearts are cleansed by the blood of Jesus, we are full of peace and thanksgiving and joy. Then we can honor God, love one another and serve others joyfully. Lee Strobel worked for the Chicago Tribune as an investigative journalist. When his wife Leslie became a Christian, he set out to prove that Christianity was a cult. His heart was hard and unforgiving, especially toward his father, and he was mean. Leslie prayed earnestly to God to remove Lee's heart of stone and give him a heart of flesh. The gospel truth moved him and his heart totally changed. He became a gospel worker, full of God's love. Jesus can change anyone's heart. Let's come to Jesus who cleanses our hearts with his precious blood.

**Second, what really matters to Jesus is faith (21-28).** Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon, about 30 miles northwest of Gennesaret (21). This was Gentile territory. Jesus might have had a quiet time with his disciples, avoiding the annoying religious leaders. But this quiet time was disturbed. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, **“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon possessed and suffering terribly”** (22). In contrast with the religious leaders, she acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. She must have heard the news that Jesus healed the sick and drove out demons by the power of God, and she simply believed. She humbly asked, **“Have mercy on me.”** She identified herself with her daughter, who was suffering from demon possession. She had a compassionate heart. She also knew that her daughter's problem was a spiritual problem. She believed that Jesus could solve this problem. She came to Jesus with a sense of urgency.

Usually Jesus responded to such pleas for mercy right away. But this time was different. Jesus did not say a word (23a). Why did Jesus do this? It was to strengthen her faith through testing. Moreover, it was to show his disciples the kind of faith he blesses. God is faithful. He will not let us be

## THE WORD OF GOD AND TRADITION

tempted beyond what we can bear (1Co 10:13). But he does test our faith for our own sake. Though Jesus seemed to intentionally ignore her, the woman did not give up. She persistently cried out for help until the disciples were bothered. They came to Jesus and urged him, **“Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us”** (23b). He answered, **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel”** (24). Jesus did not simply react to human need. He followed God’s salvation plan: first for the Jews, then for the Gentiles. It was another humiliating comment. But the woman was not offended. Instead, she came closer to Jesus and knelt before him. **“Lord, help me!”** she said (25). Though Jesus seemed to push her away, she pressed more closely toward Jesus. This is the expression of faith. Then Jesus said, **“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs”** (26). This seems to be the biggest insult of all. The Jews frequently insulted Gentiles by calling them **“dogs.”** They were referring to wild, dirty, scavengers. But the word Jesus used here is different; it is for a pet dog. Anyway, a dog is a dog. Any woman who is called a dog could become very upset. However, this woman was different. She said, **“Yet it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table”** (27). Dogs sit at the feet of their masters during meals, craving bits of food out of the master’s mercy. They don’t jump up on the table and start eating out of the master’s dish. Even if the owner does not give them crumbs, they don’t protest or become rebellious. They just keep begging. This is what the woman was doing. How could she respond in this way? It was because she was truly humble before Jesus. She must have been humbled through her experience with her daughter. How many times had she watched her daughter behave wickedly due to the demon’s influence. Each time it broke her heart a little more. She must have tried everything. But nothing could help. Now she knew that only Jesus could help her. She was determined to receive his help as a matter of life and death. There was no “Plan B,” there was no tomorrow, there was only Jesus in this moment as the only salvation from her misery. Children are the great trainers for their parents. There is no way for parents to escape training through their children. God is very wise. God trained this woman until she was really humble. Here we see that humility is the foundation for deep and great faith. Many of us are in the situation of pleading with Jesus and not hearing his immediate answer. Surely, he is training us in humility and faith. So, let’s not give up, but keep pleading.

# THE WORD OF GOD AND TRADITION

How did Jesus respond? He said to her, **“Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”** And her daughter was healed at that moment (28). Jesus commended her, saying, **“you have great faith”** and blessed her faith. Here we learn that what really matters to Jesus is faith. We cannot explain exhaustively what faith is in this brief message. But we can learn what faith is through the woman. She acknowledged that Jesus is the Messiah and came to him with her problem. She did not give up pleading with Jesus even though he said some things that were hard to accept. She did not doubt his love and become bitter or fatalistic and complain. She was not demanding but asked mercy. In contrast with the religious leaders, she was humble and trusting. She makes a great contrast with the religious leaders.

We have many problems and challenging issues personally, as a community, and nationally. The most recent tragic shooting is a symptom of the sin-sick heart condition of our country. There are so many suffering from addictions, mental illness, and even demon possession. What can we do? It is time to come to Jesus and humbly ask his mercy. With man it is impossible. But with God all things are possible. When we honor God from our hearts, God will answer our prayers and help us from above. God said in 1 Samuel 2:30, **“Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained.”** Let’s come to Jesus and ask his mercy so that we may honor God and his word from our hearts.